

Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization

Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography

Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate

Tayeb El-Hibri

لَا مَبْرَأَ لَكَ فَلَئِنْ لَمْ يَنْزِلْ بِكَ
بِطَائِرِ حَرْبٍ مِثْلَ مَا نَزَلَ بِكَ
لَا وَبِزُنُوفٍ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهَا بَقِيَّةٌ
عَلَيْهِ. خَلَعَ بِهَا سَمَاءَ بَرْقٍ لَوْ
نَظَرْنَا فِي عَجْرِهَا لَأَجْمَعْنَ قُرْآنَهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ مَا كَانُوا لَهُمْ. جَنَّتْ لَهُ
سُلْكَاهُ فِي قُبُلِهَا بِأَجْمَعِهَا
يَوْمَ دُخِيَ بِهَا وَأَلْصَقَتْ
لَا لِيُفْهَمَ هُنَا قِتْمُ بَنَةِ وَمَلَأَتْهُ
عَفْوُ لَوْ أَنَّ لِي مِثْلُ مِثْلِهِ وَهَذَا
سُئِلُوا عَنْهَا فَأَعْبَاهُ دُنْيَاهُمْ

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The history of the early ʿAbbāsīd caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries has long been studied as a factual or interpretive synthesis of various accounts preserved in the medieval chronicles. Tayeb El-Hibri's book breaks with the traditional approach, applying a literary-critical reading to examine the lives of the caliphs. By focusing on the reigns of Hārūn al-Rashīd and his successors, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, as well as on the early Sāmarran period, the study demonstrates how the various historical accounts were not in fact intended as faithful portraits of the past, but as allusive devices used to shed light on controversial religious, political, and social issues of the period, as well as on more abstract themes such as behaviour, morality, and human destiny. The tragedy of the Barmakids, the great civil war between the brothers, and the *miḥna* of al-Ma'mūn are examined as key historical moments which were debated obliquely and in dialogue with the earlier Islamic past. The analysis also reveals how the exercise of decoding Islamic historiography, through an investigation of the narrative strategies and thematic motifs used in the chronicles, can uncover new layers of meaning and even identify the early narrators. This is an important book which represents a landmark in the field of early Islamic historiography.

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Acknowledgments

This book began as a study of the reign of the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn and the pivotal political and religious transitions that accompanied his rise to power. Since its completion, however, the original objective which centered on biographical and historical goals has gradually changed toward the historiographical, exploring how medieval narrators constructed a particular memory of the early 'Abbāsid caliphate within the broader frame of early Islamic history. I would like to thank various scholars who commented on the project in its initial stage, and showed wholehearted interest in the topic. Professor Peter Awn, Caroline Bynum, Olivia R. Constable, Nina Garsoian, and Mohammad Mbodj provided many useful and diverse comments. The late professor Jeanette Wakin took a special interest in the project, and carefully read a draft of the manuscript, with her customary refinements of style, and was very eager to see it in print. Colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, especially Drs. Jay Berkovitz, Robert Sullivan, and Mary Wilson also provided encouragement and offered thoughtprovoking questions in various seminars. Conversations with Professor Lawrence Conrad on Islamic historiography were always especially enlightening and corroborated several tentative venues for evaluating the 'Abbāsid texts. Equally important were discussions with Professor Elton Daniel on the relation between Arabic and Persian historiography and the state of the field. Dr. Ayman Fu'ad Sayyid saved me enormous time by clarifying from early on the state of publication of hitherto manuscript works, and pointed to different editions. On the frontiers of style, thanks go to Ms. Janet Benton and Mary Starkey for copyediting the manuscript with care and interest. The prime debt, however, goes to professor Richard W. Bulliet who read and critiqued the work in various drafts, and was a source of continuous support. His thoughtful historical questions on a broad range of issues were especially inspiring, and convinced me that early Islamic history is far from being a closed topic.

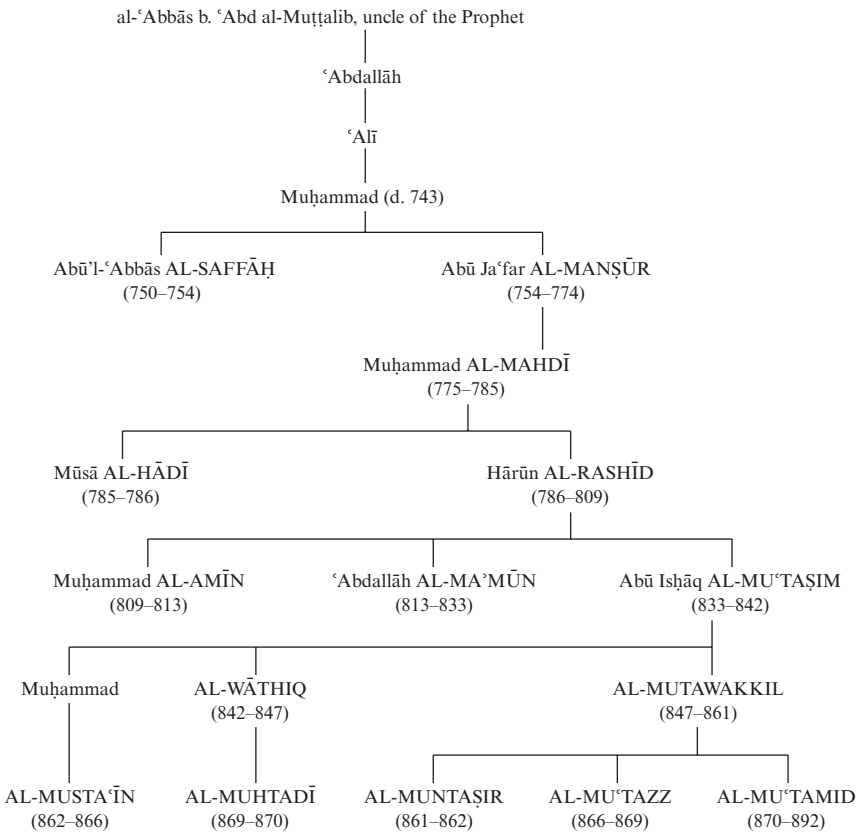
Abbreviations

<i>EI</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> (new ed.)
<i>HT</i>	<i>History of al-Ṭabarī</i> (SUNY translation; in bibliography under translators' names)
<i>IJMES</i>	<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>
Jahshiyārī	al-Jahshiyārī, <i>al-Wuzarā' wa'l-Kuttāb</i>
<i>al-Kāmil</i>	Ibn al-Athīr, <i>al-Kāmil fi'l-Ta'rikh</i>
Khaṭīb	al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, <i>Ta'rikh Baghdād</i>
<i>Murūj</i>	al-Mas'ūdī, <i>Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'ādin al-Jawhar</i>
<i>Muwaffaqiyyāt</i>	al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, <i>al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt</i>
<i>RMM</i>	<i>Revue du Monde Musulman</i>
<i>RSO</i>	<i>Rivista degli Studi Orientali</i>
<i>Siyar</i>	al-Dhahabī, <i>Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'</i>
Ṭabarī	al-Ṭabarī, <i>Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk</i> (de Goeje ed.)

Note on the dates

The dates given in this study are primarily common-era dates. Whenever relevant, *hijrī* dates are also given in brackets and occasionally relied on in light of the context of analysis, as in chapter 5.

The line of the early ʿAbbāsīd caliphs



Historical background and introduction

At its height in the ninth century AD, the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate covered an extensive realm that stretched across the African and Asian continents, from the western reaches of Carthage on the Mediterranean to the Indus River Valley in the east, spanning prime regions over which the Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Turks had gone to war during the previous thousand years. This empire had come into existence as a result of conquests that began under the early Islamic caliphate centered in Medina and its successor dynasty of the Umayyads (AD 661–750). But it was with the ‘Abbāsīds that the process of social and cultural symbiosis and economic integration began to take root in this new state, giving shape to a new society characterized by the cohesive powers of a common language and currency and a unifying religio-political center.

The ‘Abbāsīds, partly due to their rise as a religious millennial movement, were more conscious of their universal pretensions to power than their predecessors had been. The new caliphs, kinsmen to the Prophet through the line of his uncle al-‘Abbās, held messianic titles that pointed to their spiritual gifts as *imāms* and underlined their distinct historical role in guiding the mission of government. Titles such as al-Manṣūr, al-Mahdī, al-Hādī, and al-Rashīd were variant expressions of their claims to a divine right to rule, as well as to their charismatic power, and this message was given poetic expression in the shape and definition that the ‘Abbāsīds gave to their new capital. Baghdad, better known as “the City of Peace” (*madīnat al-salām*) in the official parlance of the day, was built to be the ideal city of the new state. At the time of its origin in 762, it was built in a round shape with four gates, pointing midway between the cardinal directions, in a layout intended to reconcile cosmological conceptions of the disc of the heavens with the vision of the four quarters of the known world. The Round City encircling the palace of the caliph mirrored the rotation of the constellations about the fate of the world, making Baghdad a new symbolic center in political and religious terms.¹

¹ J. Lassner, *The Shaping of ‘Abbāsīd Rule* (Princeton, 1980), 169–75; C. Wendell, “Baghdad: *Imago Mundi* and Other Foundation-Lore,” *IJMES* 2 (1971), 99–128.

As great an impact as this empire had on the fortunes of peoples and regions it ruled, however, we know few details about how it was administered and defended, what shaped the policies and motives of its caliphs, and how its subjects viewed their rulers. Medieval Arabic chronicles and literary sources provide us today with abundant anecdotal and narrative material about the lives of the caliphs, and historians have used these sources repeatedly to construct biographies of the caliphs. However, the intertwining lines of fiction and fact in these works have never been clearly separated. What did the narratives about the caliphs signify in their times? How did anecdotes convey various levels of thematic meaning? To what extent were literary tropes appreciated and detected by the medieval audience? These are some of the questions that the study of medieval Islamic historiography will gradually have to answer. This study represents an attempt in that direction. It explores the elusive nature of medieval Islamic narratives, and tries through a new reading of the sources to reposition our view of the classical intention behind the literary accounts, moving that intention from one providing direct chronology to one offering historical commentary and seeking the active engagement of readers and narrators, listeners and dramatizers. To set the stage, we shall examine here the historical background of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, and survey those significant moments in its history that would color the memory of later historical narrative and contribute to the crafting of a particular spectrum of themes. We will then sketch in broad terms the method and approach of the present critique.

Historical overview

The ‘Abbāsīd dynasty has traditionally been seen as arising immediately following the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus in the year 750. The Umayyad caliphate fell in the face of a popular revolution that swept its way from Khurāsān, the frontier province on the north-eastern border of the Islamic empire. Yet in reality it took the ‘Abbāsīd family until at least the year 762 to consolidate its hold on power and push out other contenders to the throne. In the years that led up to the revolution the ‘Abbāsīds had been one among several branches of the Prophet’s family in whose name the revolt was made that had seemed likely candidates for the new caliphate. Throughout the years of organizing the revolution the leadership issue remained open, partly because participants in the movement were united behind a slogan that ambiguously called for the succession of “one agreed upon [or worthy] of the house of Muḥammad” (*“al-riḍā min āl-Muḥammad”*).²

Socially this was a complex revolutionary movement, for it brought together diverse segments of Khurāsānī opposition, each harboring various

² P. Crone, “On the Meaning of the Abbāsīd Call to al-Riḍā,” *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Darwin, N. J., 1989), 98–99.

reasons for challenging the Umayyads. The rebels were, however, united on at least two important points, which lent them unity until the moment of victory. The first was their deep sympathy for the plight of the Hashemite family, long persecuted at the hands of the Umayyads, and an attendant desire to vindicate the memory of the family's fallen leaders; the second was their vision that this mobilization from Khurāsān was going to be a messianic movement that would usher in a new, righteous age, heralding both a political and a religious rebirth for the faith. Once chosen, the new Hashemite caliph was to preside over a millennial age that would bring about justice and prosperity.

Various signs leading up to the revolution lent confidence that an age of religious redemption was destined to concur with that political change: the fact that the first call for this movement had taken place at the turn of the first Islamic century, a moment bearing significant cyclical connotation; and that members of the Hashemite family, thought of as holding the key to an esoteric religious knowledge, handed down in the Prophetic family, had been observing cosmic signs and finally determined that the hour had arrived for making the call (or *da'wa*) for the revolution. These occurrences gave a unique dimension to the religious expectations of various followers. Further adding to these beliefs was a set of other portents that enhanced the followers' commitment to their new cause. In the way the Hashemite family set about organizing the new religious-political mission, there seemed to be signs reminiscent of the early days of the Islamic faith. The Hashemites – from their distant bases in the western provinces, Kūfa, Medina, and Mecca, and the 'Abbāsids, from al-Ḥumayma – had entrusted the responsibility for propagating the mission to a delegation of seventy Khurāsānī deputies and propagandists. This evoked memories of the time when the Prophet received the loyalty of seventy followers in Medina, who came to form the kernel community of the new religion that eventually conquered Mecca. Just as the Prophet had once turned outside Mecca for supporters, his Hashemite descendants were now seen turning outside Arabia for new supporters. And the Qur'ānic verse that spoke of the Prophet's preaching to Umm al-Qurā ("mother of cities"),³ once understood as referring to Mecca, was understood in the climate of the new times as a reference to the town of Marw, capital of the province of Khurāsān.⁴ Marw had become the organizing ground of the new *imāms*, and the Khurāsānīs were now viewed as the new Anṣār.⁵ Geographical significance played a role as well. The fact that the new *da'wa* ("the call") was initiated in Khurāsān, a region whose name meant "the land of the rising sun" and which was historically known as the area from which political movements were

³ The Qur'ānic verse reads: "And so We have revealed to you an Arabic Qur'ān, [that you may] warn the Mother of Cities and those who dwell about it" (Qur'ān 62:7). A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 2 vols. (London, 1955), II, 192.

⁴ Ibn al-Faḳīh al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1885), 369. Abū Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Tha'ālībī, *Laṭā'if al-Ma'ārif*, ed. P. de Jong (Leiden, 1867), 119.

⁵ Al-Jāhīz, "Manāqib," *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (Cairo, 1963–65), 15.

launched to revive the Iranian kingdom, now gave the enterprise an added symbolism. This encouraged the vision that the hour had finally arrived for a new dawn in Islamic history.⁶

The 'Abbāsīd claim for the imāmate on the grounds of kinship to the Prophet, however, was never secure. The 'Alids, direct descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fāṭima and her husband 'Alī (the Prophet's cousin), were their constant rivals. The 'Alids had even been the focus of opposition movements, during the first schism that brought the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu'āwīya, in conflict with the fourth caliph, 'Alī. The conflict between Mu'āwīya's descendants in Damascus and 'Alī's sympathizers in Kūfa and Ḥijāz continued for decades afterwards, producing the famous tragedy of Ḥusayn in 661 at Kerbalā and later the fall of his grandson, Zayd b. 'Alī, at Kūfa in 740, and the fall of his son Yaḥyā in Marw in 743. These were not events easily forgotten, and they continued to resonate with bitter memories across the provinces and were of primary importance in turning the Hashemite family into a magnet for various social and political oppositions ranged across the east.

Therefore the 'Alid family could, when it so desired, also call on a wide following of Arab and Iranian sympathizers. In 762, when the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr, believing the dust had settled and all was secure, set about sketching the perimeter of Baghdad, the 'Alids raised the most massive revolt they had ever organized. Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya ("the Pure Soul"), a descendant of al-Ḥasan who had long evaded accepting the 'Abbāsīd claim to power after the Umayyad fall, now came out in the open, rallied popular support in Medina, and claimed the caliphal title for himself. In a series of letters to al-Manṣūr, al-Nafs al-Zakīyya accused al-Manṣūr of having reneged on a *bay'a*, an oath of allegiance, that he, along with the leadership of the movement, had once given to the 'Alids during the underground phase of the revolution, and demanded al-Manṣūr's allegiance. Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya, whose name, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, reminded many of the Prophet's name and led some to claim that he physically resembled the Prophet, was still a child when the Hashemite patriarchs met in secret just outside Medina a few years after 719 (AH 100) to decide on their strategy, and reportedly swore allegiance to al-Nafs al-Zakīyya. Firm evidence that can corroborate the 'Alid claim on this *bay'a* is lacking, but the 'Abbāsīd arguments claiming an early right to the succession are no less a matter of debate.

This said, one is inclined to suspect that the 'Abbāsīds may indeed have double-crossed the 'Alids. To appreciate the potential for confusion on this issue, one need only imagine the loose structure that characterized the forma-

⁶ As the 'Abbāsīd Dāwūd b. 'Alī put it in his inaugural speech for the caliph al-Saffāh, "Now authority has finally been put in order (*'āda al-amru ilā niṣābihi*). Now the sun has again risen from the East . . . and now the legitimate rights have been returned to where they should belong." Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, vol. III, *Banū al-'Abbās*, ed. A. A. al-Dūrī (Wiesbaden, 1978), 140; Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh* (Beirut, 1960), II, 350.

tive years of the revolution. Spread out between Khurāsān, Irāq, and Arabia, the details of the propaganda were subject to miscommunication, as news was relayed in a secretive environment among various parties: from the Hashemite *imām* to his chief propagandist in Khurāsān, on to a team of deputies who preached vague interpretations of the messianic *da'wa*, and finally to a public that blurred the differences between 'Alid, 'Abbāsīd, and other family branches under the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Prophet's family, Hāshim.⁷

How the 'Abbāsīds came to channel the loyalty of the Khurāsānīs to their branch is a complex topic whose details lie outside the purview of the present study. Suffice it to say that the 'Abbāsīds, with their strategic skill and cohesive relations with the Khurāsānīs in the early days of their rule, proved able to circumvent 'Alid political threats. Still, the revolt of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya marked a turning point by showing a continuing contest over the goals and original intentions of the revolution. In Medina, it also showed the emergence of new levels of affinity between the leading descendants of the city's traditional elite (members of the families of the early companions of the Prophet, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and al-Zubayr) and the 'Alid rebel,⁸ as well as the affinity between religious traditionalists, such as the scholar Mālik b. Anas, and this particular 'Alid movement.⁹ In Baṣra, al-Nafs al-Zakīyya's brother, Ibrāhīm, who raised another revolt almost simultaneously against the 'Abbāsīds, was to rally an even greater following and find similar support among jurists such as Abū Ḥanīfa.¹⁰ Whether these new alliances in Medina and Baṣra were indicative of broader regional and new social affinities is not clear from the sources. Yet despite these alliances the 'Abbāsīds were able to prevail, albeit with difficulty. The new regime, it had become clear, was able to marshal military and economic resources in this critical contest with the 'Alids, and the Khurāsānīs were, for the moment, largely backing the 'Abbāsīd cause in a way that tilted the balance.

These tensions between the 'Alids and the 'Abbāsīds formed one of many challenges that plagued the rise of the 'Abbāsīds. Others included an internal debate within the 'Abbāsīd family over questions of succession, as the caliph al-Manṣūr pressured his cousin, 'Īsā b. Mūsā, to give up his claims for succession in favor of al-Manṣūr's son, al-Mahdī, on whom the caliph placed great hopes of consolidating the line of succession and stabilizing 'Abbāsīd rule. Another even more menacing issue was the resurgence of some Iranian eschatological currents, which started to surface following the arrest and downfall of the famous commander Abū Muslim. Abū Muslim, a Khurāsānī commander in charge of the 'Abbāsīd military apparatus in Khurāsān early in the

⁷ H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphate* (London, 1986), 124–25; W. Madelung, "The *Hāshimīyyāt* of al-Kumayt and Hāshimī Shī'ism," *Studia Islamica* 70 (1990), 9–10.

⁸ H. Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London, 1981), 201.

⁹ F. Buhl, "Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya," *EI*, VII, 389; Ṭabarī, III, 200.

¹⁰ J. Schacht, "Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu'mān," *EI*, I, 123.

‘Abbāsīd era, had played a key role in mobilizing Iranian support in the years leading up to the revolution. His identity and roots are shrouded with a terrific aura of myth and legend, but much of this is indicative of the enormous impact he had on the success of the revolution. Although to the Arab supporters of the revolution he represented an efficient military commander, in the east Abū Muslim seems to have been himself a center of religious and political gravity among Khurāsānīs, who saw in him a regional political champion and even a prophetic reincarnation of earlier messianic figures. All this was a source of anxiety for the absolutist caliph al-Manṣūr, who feared that the commander might either break away or support another pretender to the throne, whether an ‘Alid or an ‘Abbāsīd. Abū Muslim was thus removed from the scene through a careful plot that lured that commander from the east to Baghdad. In the period that immediately followed, the fall of Abū Muslim passed without repercussions. However, in Khurāsān several years afterward, a new wave of rebels, known as the Abū Muslimiyya, emerged, harboring a great reverence for the memory of Abū Muslim and challenging the caliphate. Combining a yearning for messianic renewal with social and cultural visions of change that centered on Iran, the rebels seemed to threaten both the caliphate and Islam itself. The lost Iranian commander, these movements asserted, had gone into occultation and would later reemerge in a messianic movement. Others believed that Abū Muslim’s soul had transmigrated to another messianic figure, who was going to lead another Khurāsānī rising against the ‘Abbāsīds in due course.¹¹ There is no definitive religious label for the ideologies of these movements, except to say that they were a reflection of syncretistic traditions that blended ideas from Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Islam, and were still fermenting in the unstable social and political climate of the post-revolutionary era.¹²

In many ways, these political challenges to ‘Abbāsīd rule were conflicts not just over the definition of legitimization, but over the ability of a central authority located in one city, Baghdad, to exercise control over the social, economic, and religious life of the provinces. Questions about how the provinces were to be internally ruled, where the tax revenues would go, and whether the caliph could extend a single set of laws to all the provinces, kept flaring up in new ways and expressions. In this regard, the challenge to the ‘Abbāsīd was no different from those facing other dynasties to establish central rule, whether before or after them, in the Near East. Despite the challenges, the ‘Abbāsīds proved to be resilient survivors. As a family they succeeded in developing solidarity and commitment to defending their collective interest against their opponents, such as the ‘Alids. Various family members accepted the succession line drawn by al-Manṣūr down to his son, al-Mahdī, and to the latter’s

¹¹ E. Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747–820* (Minneapolis and Chicago, 1979), 125–47.

¹² B. S. Amoretti, “Sects and Heresies,” *Cambridge History of Iran*, IV, ed. R. N. Frye (Cambridge, 1975), 494–98.

sons, al-Hādī and al-Rashīd. In turn, the caliphs always trusted members of their family to assume the most sensitive political and gubernatorial responsibilities. Ruling positions in provinces such as Egypt, Syria, Ḥijāz, Baṣra, Kūfa, and Jazīra were routinely assigned to members of the family, and their privileges also included occupying the ceremonial office of leading the pilgrimage caravan to Mecca. This new pattern of administration showed a marked departure from the Umayyads, who had relied mostly on tribal allies and protégés to assume a variety of posts.

Beyond their internal affairs, the ‘Abbāsids concentrated their efforts on building a cohesive monarchal institution based on a structured hierarchy of political and military clientage rooted in the memory of the revolution. The revolution not only marked the beginning of a political era, but also defined a moral and historical link among the empire’s political elite. Descendants of those who had participated in the revolution now formed a socio-political class referred to as either Abnā’ al-Dawla, Abnā’ al-Da’wa, or al-Abnā’ (the sons). Their loyalty to the regime was based not merely on economic privilege or expectations of military advantage, but on a shared relation to a key historical moment, and from that to a direct affinity to the state. This was a new experiment in Islamic political history whose roots cannot be traced to any similar model from the Byzantines or Sasanians. But although it seems to have fostered strong bonds of military loyalty, it may have had the disadvantage in the long run of drawing sharp lines between itself and other military and administrative classes and groups (particularly in the provinces) that sought to assimilate in the political rubric of the dynasty, but could not because they lacked this historical linkage with the revolution.

These problems of social assimilation, provincial control, and millennial effervescence were felt most severely by the ‘Abbāsids in Khurāsān, where political expressions took a range of forms and came in varying intensity. However, the roots of Khurāsān’s religio-political challenge and complexity stretch farther back than the ‘Abbāsids, into Sasanid times, and have a lot to do with the frontier nature of this region, straddling the borders of several empires and a range of autonomous principalities around the Oxus River Valley (Transoxiana). Locked in a diverse geo-political zone, Khurāsān faced the influence of its neighbors on social, economic, and religious levels. Alliances between Khurāsānīs and the Central Asian principalities were therefore not uncommon, and could at any time accelerate into a conflict among greater powers. In 751, when the region of Ferghāna went to war with the province of al-Shāsh (Tashkent), Ferghāna turned to China for help, while the ruler of al-Shāsh turned to the ‘Abbāsid governor of Khurāsān. The incident escalated into a military confrontation between the Abbāsids and the Chinese along the Ṭaraz River. This was the episode usually remembered as the occasion on which the Arabs obtained the secret of papermaking from Chinese prisoners and transmitted it to the west. The battle that took place had gone in favor of the ‘Abbāsids, which put an end to Chinese influence in

the area,¹³ but in later years, particularly in the reigns of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, new actors, such as Tibet, were to appear on the scene again.¹⁴

Buddhism may also have played a major role in bringing about this cultural affinity between Khurāsān and Transoxiana. Buddhism, a religion that went through phases of wide support in Sasanid Persia and the Fertile Crescent from the third century AD, had strongly colored the ethical worldview of Manichaeism. Furthermore, we know that a number of Buddhist religious centers had flourished in Khurāsān, the most important of which was the Nawbahār ("New Temple") near the town of Balkh, which evidently served as a pilgrimage center for political leaders, who came from far and wide to pay homage to it.¹⁵ The Barmakid family, which took a role in the dissemination of the Hashemite *da'wa* in Khurāsān during the revolution and later occupied center stage as vizirs and bureaucrats in the court of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, were originally the chief priests of the Nawbahār of Balkh, and were connected through marriage ties with neighboring princes in Transoxiana.¹⁶ The religious, social, and political prestige that the Barmakids commanded, therefore, were a key reason why the 'Abbāsids turned to them for support. And this cooperation was cemented when the caliph al-Mahdī and his vizir Yaḥyā al-Barmakī each had his son nursed by his opposite number's wife. As a result Hārūn al-Rashīd and Ja'far al-Barmakī became milk brothers, a bond that affirmed a Perso-Arab partnership in power.

The east continued to command the greatest share of 'Abbāsīd attention, and the caliphs attempted various experiments for establishing effective administration over Khurāsān, including a strict phase under the Abnā' commander, 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān, and a lenient phase under the stewardship of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī, both during the reign of al-Rashīd. Our evidence is sparse about the details of various 'Abbāsīd administrations in Khurāsān, but toward the end of his life, al-Rashīd appointed his son al-Ma'mūn as governor of Khurāsān. The caliph's idea was a new method in 'Abbāsīd government, and the rationale behind it lay in al-Ma'mūn's ties to maternal kin in the east. Al-Ma'mūn was the son of a Persian concubine, and the caliph hoped this could appeal in due course to Persian cultural and political sensitivities while al-Ma'mūn could bridge Khurāsān's administration under the direct control of Baghdad. There was little time to judge the efficacy of this new experiment, since the caliph al-Rashīd soon died, in 809, while on a campaign in Khurāsān. He left behind al-Ma'mūn in Marw, and another son, al-Amīn, who now acceded to the caliphate in Baghdad.

The events that soon followed the death of al-Rashīd were to be of critical

¹³ H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia* (New York, 1970), 96.

¹⁴ C. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton, 1987), 157–60.

¹⁵ W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1928), 77; L. Bouvat, "Les Barmécides d'après les historiens Arabes et Persans," *RMM* 20 (1912), 26; R. W. Bulliet, "Naw Bahar and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism," *Iran* 14 (1976), 140–5.

¹⁶ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, ed. I. 'Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut, 1968), VI, 219.

importance in 'Abbāsīd history, as a conflict ensued between the brothers al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. As relations deteriorated and the crisis over succession escalated into a civil war, al-Amīn found support among the Abnā', while al-Ma'mūn was aided by a new group of Khurāsānī supporters led by the Sahlids, former protégés of the Barmakids, and the Tāhirids, a leading family in the area of Būshanj and Herāt. The overarching dispute over the throne also parted sympathies down the provinces, as various towns declared their loyalty to one of the brothers, thereby leading to a conflict within the provinces too. Al-Amīn's forces gradually lost ground to al-Ma'mūn's armies and, in 813, Tāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, al-Ma'mūn's commander, advanced on Baghdad. After a siege that lasted nearly a year, his troops took the city by force. In the midst of the chaos and turmoil that followed, al-Amīn was taken prisoner and, probably at Tāhir's command, was secretly put to death, an event that would have lingering political ramifications. Al-Ma'mūn, meanwhile, was declared caliph in Marw and continued to reside in Khurāsān, giving no indication of a desire to return to Baghdad. It was only years later, in 819, when he found conditions of protracted political chaos and instability still brewing in Irāq, that he returned with his entourage, reestablished the old capital as his center, and set about reorganizing the foundations of the state and reuniting its fragmented authority in the provinces. Al-Ma'mūn proved to be a far more systematic planner of policies in Baghdad than he was in Khurāsān. He carefully pursued a policy of recentralization, revived 'Abbāsīd defenses on the Byzantine frontier, and reorganized the military in a way that diversified the state army to include more Persian troops, and later included the beginning of a Turkish-slave military system. But by far the policy that has been most associated with his name is known as the *miḥna*, or religious trial/inquisition, when he tried to impose the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān espoused by the Mu'tazila school of speculative theology on the traditional circle of ḥadīth scholars.

Al-Ma'mūn died in 833, in the midst of a Byzantine campaign. His successor, al-Mu'taṣim, continued many of his policies. He kept up state support for the *miḥna*, maintained a substantial role for the Persian political elite (such as the Tāhirids in the east), and further expanded the Turkish-slave military system. He also founded the city of Sāmarrā' which, as his new capital, was intended to accommodate the burgeoning Turkish army, but which may also have been meant to distance the caliphal court from the traditionalist opposition of Baghdad as the new regime pursued a controversial religious policy. Baghdad had been a city of the Abnā' and maintained residues of political hostility to the successors of al-Amīn.

In Sāmarrā', al-Mu'taṣim (833–842) maintained a strong grip on his new military elite, as did his son and short-lived successor, al-Wāthiq (842–47). But soon after, the authority of the caliphate began to give way to an assertive and factional military. The Turkish-slave military system had been founded to serve the function of directly guarding the caliph's political interest. In

particular, al-Ma'mūn had drawn on their support, after the erosion of Arab tribal military support in the western provinces during the civil war, to recentralize the provinces and cope with new threats cropping up on the empire's borders, such as the syncretistic Mazdakite revolt of Bābak al-Khurramī in Azerbaijan and the Byzantines in Asia Minor. Having served its original purposes, the Turkish military now became an idle army, with a layer of officer-aristocracy that lived off its vast estates in Sāmarrā' and Mesopotamia and turned to manipulating the caliphs and state policy. The succession of al-Mutawakkil, the inexperienced son of al-Mu'taṣim, indicated a suspicious shift from al-Wāthiq's succession line that was brought about purely by court intrigue. It was a sign of things to come.

Al-Mutawakkil tried various methods to alleviate the caliphate's political weakness, the most notable of which was to end the *miḥna* program and realign state affinity with the traditionalist orthodox scholars; at one point he even contemplated shifting the capital to Damascus to escape the local military strongmen. Although a major achievement, the caliph's new religious policy failed to gain the caliphate the popular political support al-Mutawakkil had hoped for. Over the course of the *miḥna*, the traditionalist scholars had gradually developed a degree of social solidarity. As they found themselves threatened by the state and by other religious ideas, they set themselves apart from the caliphate, forming a new focal point of religious legitimization. The caliphate, having lost the meaning of its original political legitimization – which dated to the revolutionary era – through years of civil war and stormy arguments over the *miḥna*, could claim only a vague and shadowy credibility with the public. And it had become deeply vulnerable to military manipulation in Sāmarrā'. The massive amounts the caliphs expended on building the city, the plans for which apparently continued to multiply because of a colossal mistake made in the original urban planning,¹⁷ along with the need to keep the salaried troops content, eventually broke the caliphate's finances, leaving al-Mutawakkil and successive caliphs vulnerable.

Al-Mutawakkil's assassination in 861 by a military clique of palace conspirators paved the way for a stream of weak caliphs, mostly his children, who tried various alliances with military strongmen to extend some semblance of new political authority. In the end their efforts proved futile. Scarcely would a caliph, such as al-Musta'in or al-Mu'tazz, succeed in eliminating the dominance of one commander when a new pattern of alliance among other commanders would force him to give in to their influence. The tragedies of these caliphs have been commemorated in a singularly detailed fashion in the accounts of Ṭabarī. Intensely vivid and focused on intrigues within the palace, the story harbors a breath of suspense that is all its own, as we see one caliph's (al-Muhtadī's) last attempt to escape the palace and rally public support, then

¹⁷ J. M. Rogers, "Samarra, a Study in Medieval Town-Planning," *The Islamic City: A Colloquium*, ed. A. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford, 1970), 145.

pursued by his military commanders, he is shown scaling buildings and jumping across rooftops to hang on to his life. Hārūn's days were now gone and forgotten. With Sāmarrā' we face a scene of chaos and political decline, a tragic story whose picture is magnified in the weathered outlines and ruins of that city on the Tigris today.

The story of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate has been the subject of extensive examination in recent years, with most tending to focus on the social background of the 'Abbāsīd revolution and the era of consolidation of 'Abbāsīd rule.¹⁸ Since the extant accounts on the caliphate date to a period after the 'Abbāsīd rise to power – indeed, after a series of critical transitions had occurred, including the civil war, the *miḥna*, and the return from Sāmarrā' to Baghdad – historians repeatedly find themselves facing the multiple challenge of trying to read through biases that accumulated over time, with successive episodes tinging the original memory of how things really happened. Official 'Abbāsīd tampering with the representation of the events that paved their rise to power, for example, makes the story of the family's emergence seem like a tendentious one. Hagiographic prophecies surrounding their rise, sympathetic portrayals of leading family members, and the forging of historical legitimization through linkages with pious and prophetic ancestors are some of the factors that cloud the historian's path of analysis. The fact that the 'Abbāsīds had to go through great trouble to argue their claims against the 'Alids and to defend al-Manṣūr's consolidation of the succession within his family, for example, shows us that they were responding to other historical voices that have long since vanished, but not before leaving their mark on the process of historical formulation. In this context, the recent research of J. Lassner is particularly noteworthy for the way it has uncovered various forms of 'Abbāsīd hagiography that show an active 'Abbāsīd propagandistic position in the narration of the revolution's history.¹⁹

Most of our accounts on the 'Abbāsīds, however, are not specifically hagiographic, and neither are they always linked to the revolution. In such a situation, narratives, with their matter-of-fact tenor, can seem to reflect the survival of an original historical account, one that was either too great to be forgotten

¹⁸ The historical literature on the 'Abbāsīds is over a century old now, if we reckon at outset of these analytic studies the works of Van Vloten around the 1890s. The most notable contributions down this lineage are those of: F. Gabrieli, "La Successione di Hārūn ar-Raṣīd e la guerra fra al-Amīn e al-Ma'mūn," *RSO*, 11 (1926–28), 341–97; J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall* (Calcutta, 1927); A. Dūrī, *al-'Aṣr al-'Abbāsī al-Awwal* (Baghdad, 1945); N. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad* (Chicago, 1946); D. Sourdel, *Le Vizirat abbaside de 749 à 936*, 2 vols. (Damascus, 1959–60); C. Cahen, "Points de vue sur la 'Révolution abbaside,'" *Revue Historique*, 202 (1963), 295–335; F. Omar, *The 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Baghdad, 1969); M. A. Shaban, *The 'Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1970); Daniel, *Political and Social History*; Lassner, *'Abbāsīd Rule*; Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*; P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph* (Cambridge, 1987). A fuller list of other contributions and studies by some of the above authors and others will be found in the bibliography.

¹⁹ J. Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory*, American Oriental Society Series, 66 (New Haven, 1986).

or somehow that seeped through the wreckage of wars, allowing us the odd testimony of a surviving member of the former political elite, a wandering palace guard, or a retired singer. It is not surprising, in such an atmosphere, that many have found it both plausible and feasible to sift through the corpus of medieval Islamic narratives and come out with a range of historical studies. The way that historical accounts were often reported in chains of transmission, in the *isnād* model, further strengthened the image of reporters' reliability. Sources as varied as Ṭabarī, Ya'qūbī, Jahshiyārī, and Mas'ūdī have therefore been plundered for information about the political, economic, and administrative affairs of the empire. Based on data from narratives preserved in these sources, historians have built elaborate historical syntheses, ranging from political histories to studies of the 'Abbāsīd bureaucracy or the economic history of the caliphate. Implicitly, however, all of these efforts have rested on the unstated methodological assumption that we have reliable criteria for separating myth from fact, which in fact we do not. Such schools as those of J. Wellhausen and L. Caetani, which debated the veracity of the historical reporting in the first century of Islam on the basis of regional currents of historical transmission, based on critiques of the testimonies of such well-known narrators as Sayf b. 'Umar (d. 796), Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. 774), 'Umar b. Shabba (d. 812), and al-Madā'inī (d. 839),²⁰ become somewhat obsolete when we come to the 'Abbāsīd narratives, because the pool of narrators becomes entirely different.

The problem of 'Abbāsīd narrators lies in the fact that they were largely a group of people not well known for their scholarly role in historical transmission or redaction. Accounts of the reigns of al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn, and al-Mutawakkil, for example, are usually based on the testimony of people associated with the court in each of these eras. This consistent dependence on contemporary reporters makes for a rapid shift in the identity of reporters from one reign to the next and undermines the approach that emphasizes schools of transmission. The notion that Ṭabarī's chronicle preserves within it "books" of former scholars who transmitted accounts orally and eventually surfaced disparately in Ṭabarī's text can scarcely be substantiated from the vantage point of 'Abbāsīd historiography. Indeed, the mystery of historical reporting is further compounded by the fact that, although the above-mentioned list of scholars, who are best known for their accounts about the era of the Rāshidūn, shows that they lived well into the 'Abbāsīd period and were contemporary with its events – with some even having been associated with the 'Abbāsīd court – they seem completely absent from the circle of historical reporters. The absence of these scholars from the ranks of 'Abbāsīd narrators, combined with the nature of the reports attributed to a diverse range of new figures, impels one to theorize that these names were on occasion contrived,

²⁰ A. Noth and L. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition, A Source-Critical Study*, trans. M. Bonner (Princeton, 1994), 14. A. A. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. L. Conrad (Princeton, 1983).

as an extension to the literary-tropological puzzle carried out mostly within the narrative content itself, as we shall see below.

The present study breaks with contemporary studies on the 'Abbāsids in that it is not concerned with establishing one or another picture of historical fact. Nor does it seek to build social, political, and religious interpretations on the basis of the chronicle's information. Rather, it adopts a literary-critical approach to reading the sources, based on a new set of propositions and assumptions aimed at establishing an originally intended meaning in the narratives. The starting point of the discussion rests on the view that the extant 'Abbāsīd historical narratives were not intended originally to tell facts, but rather to provide commentary on a certain political, religious, social, or cultural issue that may have derived from a real and controversial historical episode. Narrators writing before and during the era of Ṭabarī crafted the literary form of *qiṣṣa* or *khabar* (narrative report), often with the intention of discussing the controversial results of a political, social, or moral point.²¹

As noted in the earlier sketch of the background of 'Abbāsīd rule, there were numerous issues that would have opened up to a plethora of opinions: the relation between the 'Abbāsids and the 'Alids, between Khurāsān and Baghdad, questions over dynastic succession, and, later, religious problems associated with the policies of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, and political problems connected with the rise of the Turkish military system in Sāmarrā'. This is in addition to discussions of ideals of political rule, ethical behavior, and theoretical questions about the nature and direction of historical change. Discussion of these issues took place in conjunction with the focus that narrators accorded to analyzing human behavior. There is an intricate detail that we sometimes see in the portraits of certain historical personages which highlights the existence of a historiographic current that is not merely descriptive. The transformation of the human condition, mood, and beliefs were questions that were discussed, both within the scope of religious parameters and with attention to secular moral values, two spheres that were seen as interacting in shaping the plot of human history. Important political and military personalities, such as the caliphs, did get extra attention in many stories in the chronicles, but this focus was related not to their political importance as much as to their individual characters, and to how they dealt with a range of ethical, political, and historical challenges. There were complex considerations involved in the choice of historical characters, and this subject was intimately tied to the dramaturgical roles these actors assumed in the sweep of various plots that made up 'Abbāsīd history. The drama of personal lives was

²¹ For a new reading within this framework, applied to the Rāshidūn period, see, S. Leder, "The Literary Use of the Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing," *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. I, *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1992), 277–315. And as applied to Persian historiography, M. Waldman, *Towards a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography* (Columbus, 1980). Also the suggestive essay by B. Radtke, "Towards a Typology of 'Abbāsīd Universal Chronicles," *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbāsīd Studies* 3 (1990), 1–14.

intertwined with the political prospects of the state, and the former had as much influence as the latter in signaling the fortunes of the caliphate and the fate of the community, and in setting the stage for diverse trajectories of historical tragedy.

From an initial glance, the surviving corpus of 'Abbāsīd narratives already reveals a number of curious aspects that invite suspicion. One unusual aspect in the structure of these narratives is the disproportionate emphasis given to the discussion of the affairs of Khurāsān. The interaction between Baghdad and Khurāsān is a story told in far greater length than is anything involving other provinces, such as Syria, Egypt, or Arabia. Other oddities include the disproportionate emphasis on certain conflicts. The four years of the succession crisis between the children of Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, for example, are recounted in rich, anecdotal detail. Yet numerous years in the chronicles get no more than a scanty page of annalistic points on the appointments of governors and brief mentions of certain rebellions and wars. The relationship between the 'Alids and the 'Abbāsīds is also recounted with particular interest by reporters, and we are often guided through tragic moments of 'Alid rebellion in a way that reflects a distinct melancholic mood.

Against the backdrop of such a carefully structured agenda of topics laden with intentional historical views, one grows suspicious of an even wider spectrum of narratives. The extensive discussions accorded to the relations between the caliph and his vizirs, between vizirs and commanders, and between commanders and rebels invite one's suspicion about their motives, even if independently these discussions may not have seemed to be fictional fields of historical play. In this regard, the career of the Barmakids and their tragedy in the reign of al-Rashīd have long loomed large in the imagination of modern scholars. What lay behind their initial favor with the court, and how they later came to be estranged from the caliph so quickly, have never ceased to be a mystery. This unevenness in the historical material cannot be justified as accidental or as the result of the survival of those reports deemed most worthy as historical documents. There surely must be a logic behind the choices made some time in the ninth century to transmit records about certain issues and controversies, to provide a range of reports about those moments and not others. The successive chapters of this book will be devoted to exploring the motives and intentions that lay behind the composition of these narratives.

Complicating the reader's ability to discern the various sources of voices in the text is the way narrators of different persuasions chose to articulate their views. In an attempt to restrict the scope of circulation of these messages and commentaries, narrators often resorted to complex stylistic forms to express their views. Figurative language and patterns of allusion involving pun, metaphor, irony, symbolism, and symmetrical construction seem pervasive in the text and underscore one's sense of a conscious historical intention. Our focus on unlocking these stylistic forms, however, will not aim solely at probing the

medieval aesthetic of literary composition. Rather, we shall focus on the nuances of the text and its broader organization, in the hope of gauging broader systems of historical interpretation that are anchored in the vital issues of the time, and of determining how these interpretations cut across the disparate narratives.

Decoding the historical texts, as this study will show, involves the dual task of tracing the line of meaning and establishing linkages across eras, regions, and systems of thought. The plot of certain stories occasionally penetrates, sequentially or sporadically, within a coherent historical phase across fragmented narratives. Equally, however, the line of meaning tends to break out of the anticipated historical order, intruding in an intertextual manner on other histories (biblical, Sasanid, Rāshidūn, or Umayyad), depending on a linkage of character, motif, moral, or puzzle. Such elliptical potentialities, although hypothetical from a modern perspective, would have been intelligible to a classical audience. With the appropriate level of immersion into the cultural, political, and religious signs of the age, and with a sensitivity to the issue of debate and a feel for the fabric of expression, one can recognize the intended roads of meaning. Although on occasion ambiguous, these texts do form a cohesive array of narratives that were meant to be read in a specific way, even when that way is in itself indeterminate.

An additional issue one needs to account for is that of multiple narrative references. One frequently finds that different accounts bear different levels of literary and thematic suggestiveness. The same anecdote or narrative could form an anchor for several more limited compositions. Readers attuned to the hierarchy of meaning committed all these accounts to memory and probably reflected on them as a vital and immediate literary culture. Repetition of exposure to particular texts was therefore as expected as was the crafting of newer pieces of historical representation. Since the 'Abbāsīd narratives no longer hold the photographic spot in collective memory that they once did, and since the present approach will require repeated reference to certain narratives to show the various types of suggestiveness, I have given certain names to specific narratives deemed central in the order of the 'Abbāsīd historical material. By referring the reader to the anecdote title, I have hoped to avoid repeating the description of the anecdote involved. Anecdotes and narratives as such will function as tableaux of personalities, events, and settings. Their importance lies as much in their central theme as in their detail and in subsequent responsive attempts at dialogue and rearrangement.

Since this approach has the tendency to gravitate more to a literary framework, one that would make stylistic aspects predominate as the guiding categories of analysis, and as a result may compromise its historical framework, I have chosen to make the historical personalities or families the focus of the study: the caliphs as texts, as it were. This method is guided partly by the fact that the sources focus on individuals and their behavior more systematically than on any other angle, and also by the fact that the progress of their plots

(i.e., the temporal realization of certain goals within the stories) is bound, sooner or later, to be reflected in ways affecting the lives of others (although more abstract concepts such as the state, the community, or the spirit of an institution can also form likely targets). The reader will come to notice how this approach is applied as we focus on the portraits of the caliphs. The conceptual frame of the study will emerge in the conclusions drawn from this new reading of the problematic narratives.

Hārūn al-Rashīd: where it all started or ended

Few figures in world history have left as durable an impression on modern society as the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. Whereas the names of famous figures are usually associated with a specific achievement, era, or event, Hārūn's name is familiar enough without reference to either a chronological frame or an actual physical setting. His reign, as one publisher in the Victorian age wrote in trying to promote a biography of the caliph, "belongs to all time and no time,"¹ an era idealized in later imagination to symbolize an age of fabulous prosperity, a resplendent court, and an Islamic empire whose realm stretched as far as the caliph desired. The name of the caliph has been so synonymous with the concept of a golden age of medieval Islamic civilization that his biographies have generally provided occasions for describing the origin of Islam, the spread of the Arab conquests under the Umayyads, and the sophistication of cultural life in Damascus and Baghdad, as well as in Cordoba.

Trying to sketch the line between myth and fact in the portrait of the caliph has long been a shadowy exercise, and generations of the caliph's admirers have generally, and probably intentionally, been content to let the ambiguity remain. The main source for this ambiguity lies in the text that best promoted the name of Hārūn al-Rashīd in the West, *The Thousand and One Nights*, a compendium of tales that conflated medieval personalities, various cultural histories, and many modes of thought into a hybrid mythological portrait of the caliph and his age. Notwithstanding the obviously ahistorical nature of these tales, when scholars began in the nineteenth century to turn their attention to the real historical sources in their quest to construct a synthetic biography of the caliph, the image that arose from their writings was not very different from the earlier popular portrait. The historical Hārūn was in many ways the mirror image of the romanticized Hārūn. This resemblance is perhaps suggestive of a dim historical connection between the tales of the *Nights* and the popular caliphal anecdotes that ornament various medieval chronicles. But whereas dismissal of the historical reality of the stories of the *Nights* has become almost instinctive, critiquing the veracity of anecdotes in

¹ E. H. Palmer, *Haroun AlRaschid, Caliph of Baghdad* (London, 1881), 5.

the chronicles calls for more justification. Since the method for establishing this justification has never been systematically demonstrated, historians have generally relied on their sixth sense as a guide when extracting what each considers a trustworthy corpus of historical evidence from the pool of conflicting anecdotes.²

Modern biographers have been content with the ambiguous dimension of the caliph's life, and have been reluctant to address contradictions in the sources unless the legend becomes excessively strident. The story describing how the caliph one day suddenly turned against his ministers, the Barmakid family, and removed them from power still represents a prime example of the challenges surrounding any systematic analysis of the motives and policies of the caliph. In the medieval chronicles, there are as many reasons given for the caliph's destruction of the Barmakids as there are known victims of the affair. Historians have long noted the contradictions in and occasional triviality of these reasons and have admitted that it is very hard to discern the true reason. In spite of this, many have taken the liberty of continuing to pass judgment about the psychology and rationality of the caliph in light of this incident, and have built elaborate socio-political analyses of his motives. Common explanations variously portray the caliph as jealous of his ministers' power or mistrustful of the political loyalty of the Barmakids.³ The caliph has also paid dearly for the image of courtly glamour, festive banquets, and uncontrolled generosity toward poets. Basing their judgments purely on a variety of flowery anecdotes, biographers have hastened to sketch a bitterly negative impression of the caliph's social, administrative, and economic policies.⁴

² The first of the caliph's modern biographers justifies his approach as follows: "[I have] selected chiefly such anecdotes as have been handed down by trustworthy authority, such as bear upon themselves the stamp of truth"; he goes on to state that he has omitted anecdotes about jokes that "appear too frivolous for serious historical work," but then adds: "I would, however, remind the reader that beneath the trivial exterior of these tales there lies much that is true, and they certainly reflect faithfully Arab society as it existed under the caliphs of Baghdad" (Palmer, *Haroun AlRaschid*, 220–21). G. Audisio states in the same vein: "No historian, however skeptical, will ever succeed in proving that Harun al-Rashid did not actually make these adventurous promenades with Ja'far and the eunuch Masrūr. Legend is, after all, only the poetic sublimation of reality" (G. Audisio, *Harun al-Rashid, Caliph of Baghdad* [New York, 1931], 70). Later, N. Abbott would critique such works as oriented more toward "pleasure than instruction," and asserts that she will in contrast "keep close to the sources," but then produces a credulous work on a greater level of synthesis: Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 82.

³ Bouvat, "Les Barmécides," 75–76; Sourdél, *Le Vizirat abbaside*, 156–58; Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 127–29.

⁴ In a caustic observation, Philby states:

While the Calif and his court, searching the world over for men of wits and parts, staged the renaissance of art and learning at the capital, the subject population was left in the outer darkness of ignorance with no attempt made to cater to its needs (p. 76) . . . The halo of Harun served but to throw a beam of lurid light upon the gloom of harrassed subjects that fed his pomp (p. 83) . . . The footlights of history . . . shone full upon the Calif himself enthroned in the foreground amidst his courtiers and his ladies, but scarcely illumined the gloom of harassed populations and sulky provinces in the background, of which therefore we only catch glimpses when they come forward in rebellion (p. 146). (H. St. J. B. Philby, *Harun al-Rashid* [Edinburgh, 1934]).

This tendency to mix fact and fiction, or rather to rely on a subjective rationalizing approach for distinguishing between the two, was mostly a feature of the modern biographies of the caliph, which reached a peak around the turn of the twentieth century, a time of widespread fascination with the history of the caliphate and the image of a golden age. The focus on the person of Hārūn as well as on the general political narrative of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate gradually fell out of fashion in the postcolonial world of recent decades. Contemporary scholars now turn more to examining the institutional, administrative, or social history of the 'Abbāsīds rather than to deciphering the lives of the caliphs or producing another synthetic political narrative.⁵ Still, modern authors' views of the caliphs' behavior continue to echo the judgments formulated by the earlier orientalist biographers.

The *Thousand and One Nights* cannot be viewed as the only impetus for the beginning of the modern biographies of Hārūn al-Rashīd. One also has to place this issue in the political and cultural context of the turn of the century. Since it first started to attract attention, the historical material on al-Rashīd's reign, with its anecdotal form and realistic nature, quickly appealed to popular readership, and enticed writers to try to synthesize it into a narrative form. Crafting a complete biography of the caliph was a popular undertaking because it seemed to touch a familiar subject in the royalist milieu of nineteenth-century Europe. A story about an oriental monarch held all the more appeal because it illustrated dimensions of behavior that the West viewed as both wildly unreal and somehow part of the contemporaneous culture of the East. Hārūn's authoritarianism and arbitrary judgment of the Barmakids, for example, confirmed perceptions of unbridled authoritarianism in oriental rule, and served as a contrast to the constitutional monarchs of the West.

The mix of myth and fact in the romanticizing literature therefore was accommodated across an array of colonial readership, especially in view of the way this literature gave a sense of political and cultural distance between the reader and this subject. The leisurely reader, however, was not solely to blame for enticing these biographical efforts. Equally important were the political motives of the time. Exotic lifestyle aside, Hārūn was also a serious political matter, especially because he also showed an admirable side. His successful military career, combined with various anecdotes about his generosity, gallantry, and dignity, stimulated an idealized portrait of the caliph, which

This view has been followed into this decade by the most recent observer on the subject, C. E. Bosworth, when he states: "His extravagant gifts to poets, singers, popular preachers, ascetics, and so forth, were merely what was expected of a ruler, and one should always recall that somewhere in the caliphal lands someone – whether a fellah in the Nile valley, a merchant in Baghdad, or an artisan in Nishapur – was paying for all such manifestations of royal conspicuous consumption." (Bosworth, *HT*, xxx, xx).

⁵ Some of the variant new angles on 'Abbāsīd history include: M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History, a New Interpretation 750–1055*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1976); Daniel, *Political and Social History*; P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses. The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980); Kennedy, *Prophet*; I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 1988).

biographers also wanted to preserve. Politically, the life of Hārūn was thought to give some sort of coherent angle on the classical oriental monarchy and issues of government in Asia and Africa, which were newly coming under European and especially British rule. The story of Hārūn essentially suggested how Eastern monarchs handled political, social, and administrative issues of government in the same colonial lands in the East.⁶ Hārūn represented to the West not only a distant monarchical cousin, but a direct ancestral paradigm of authority⁷ for the various Eastern princes whom Britain coopted into a colonial worldview centered on a Victorian ladder of imperial hierarchy. It is not a coincidence therefore that biographies of the caliph, not to mention the greatest romance with the idea of the caliphate, flourished mostly in a country with a strong monarchical culture.⁸

The specifics about Hārūn (time, place, language) mattered less in this context than his memory and persona which were deployed across colonial boundaries in a way that served both the enterprise of control and the imagination. To maintain a retinue of Eastern forms of petty principalities, there was a need to examine such a successful specimen of Islamic rule, then understand its flaws, and reintroduce it in a modified version of rule that could be emulated systematically. The mission served the twofold purposes of endowing colonial princes with an aura of native authenticity and connection with the past, all under the aegis of the empire,⁹ and to preserve a living visual example, an archetype of oriental monarchy who personified for the Victorians the notion of a universally prevalent system of traditions, and confirmed, through a process of contrast, the European sense of the superiority of their customs to those outside.¹⁰ The interest in the biography of the caliphs therefore had a didactic quality that was anchored in an atmosphere of political and cultural priorities that has since faded, but not without permanently damaging our modern perception of Hārūn al-Rashīd.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an assessment of the trust-

⁶ Admiring Hārūn's appointment of an exacting governor to the Egyptian province, Palmer appreciates the success of that governor in collecting the tax revenues of Egypt completely, saying that "for the first time within the memory of man, the Egyptian revenue was punctually paid" (Palmer, *Haroun AlRaschid*, 63).

⁷ Attempting to place the caliphate of al-Rashīd in a conceptual context, Philby states: "Harun was a despot by birth, by education and by force of circumstances, the heir of a hybrid political philosophy born of the strange union of a young and vigorous democratic Arabia with a prostrate, effeminate and ancient tradition of absolute monarchy" (Philby, *Harun al-Rashid*, 124).

⁸ In this context, the tale about the establishment of ties and exchange of gifts between Hārūn and Charlemagne, and Hārūn's purported symbolic sending of the keys of Jerusalem to the Carolingian monarch, no doubt further strengthened the myth and allure of Hārūn in the West: Einhard and Notker Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. L. Thorpe (London, 1969), 70, 145–49.

⁹ B. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. T. Ranger and E. Hobsbawm (Cambridge, 1983), 165–71.

¹⁰ Note Philby's comments comparing imperial systems East and West (*Harun al-Rashid*, 78, 83, 97). See also Audisio, *Harun al-Rashid*, 105.

worthy portions of narratives about al-Rashīd's life, or to write another historicizing biography. As already mentioned, such an enterprise is fraught with problems of arbitrary authorial judgments about what constitute authentic information. The corpus of medieval sources has undergone a series of embellishments, the most serious of which took place at a very early stage, perhaps even before the story was committed to print in the ninth century. Those who are still keen on knowing something about the life of the caliph, as this study will show, will in the future need to settle for a slimmer version of the true events of the life of the caliph, something not exceeding three or four pages. What we shall examine here, instead, is how the extant information about the caliph is ordered according to criteria that were most meaningful in early medieval times. The intellectual scaffoldings that permitted the literary construction of the image of the caliph have since been lost, and a modern reader can only view from a distance the edifice of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate and marvel at its often apparent plausibility and, perhaps, beauty. But the story of the caliphate actually forms a carefully crafted tale whose purpose was much less to entertain than to address controversial views and religious, cultural, and moral issues most hotly contested in the century immediately following al-Rashīd's death.

The elements of idealization of al-Rashīd

The legendary image of the caliph that arises from the entertaining tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* represents a spin-off from an earlier form of idealization whose roots can still be found in the historical sources. The medieval Islamic sources provide anecdotes about the caliph that show him a charismatic leader, and a patron of scholars and successful poets. More significant for the various chroniclers, however, was the religious image of the caliph. The first item that strikes the attention of a reader of the sources is a classic string of laudatory descriptions of the caliph, which states that he used to pray 100 *rak'as* per day, donated 1,000 dirhams of his personal wealth to charitable causes daily, and spent the years of his reign alternating between leading the pilgrimage to Mecca in one year and leading a military expedition against the Byzantine empire in the next. "When he made the Pilgrimage," Ṭabarī says, "he used to take with him one hundred jurists with their sons, and if he did not make the Pilgrimage he would send three hundred men, defraying their expenses handsomely at his own cost, as well as the Splendid Veil of the Ka'ba."¹¹ In short, the chronicler tried to emphasize that the caliph was a devout believer who lived up to the duties of the caliphal office. Against the backdrop of later medieval Islamic political theory, which defined the prime responsibilities of the caliph as leading the community in its religious rituals

¹¹ Ṭabarī, III, 741; Muḥammad B. Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, ed. I. 'Abbās (Beirut, 1974), IV, 226.

and defending it in times of war, Hārūn appears faithful to the model of Islamic rulership. This consistency between theory and practice, however, has more to do with the fact that the above description of the ideal caliphal function was tailored by later Muslim scholars around al-Rashīd's activities.

The sources insist that, throughout his years, the caliph was motivated primarily by religious considerations. What Hārūn's actual personality, beliefs, and policy intentions were cannot be sufficiently addressed by synthesizing the sources or critiquing them on partially rationalistic grounds. In this chapter we shall explore the political and religious roots that contributed to the formation of such an idealized image of al-Rashīd in the ninth century. We shall begin with the assertion that the idealization of al-Rashīd as a pious, conscientious ruler primarily concerned with the welfare of his subjects, and as an orthodox ruler committed to defending Islamic orthodoxy against its enemies, was contrived long after the caliph's death to serve ideas and social interests that prevailed in the later ninth century.

The reign of Hārūn was particularly susceptible to the rewriting influence of later orthodox scholars because his reign immediately preceded the famous upheavals that spanned the reigns of his two successors, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. Since the first was held responsible for provoking the civil war, and the second for initiating the religious problem of the *miḥna*, writers nostalgically looked to Hārūn's reign as an era that was as peaceful as it was free of later religious tensions. Descriptions of conditions of excessive prosperity, courtly glamor, and public confidence in the reign of al-Rashīd were intended to provide a stark contrast to the misery, melancholy, and ruin brought about by the civil war. Similarly, the admiration of the 'ulamā' writing in the post-*miḥna* period for the religious tranquillity of Hārūn's reign impelled them to claim it as an era in which orthodoxy – articulated in exactly the terms they later used against the Mu'tazila – formed the bedrock of state ideology. Ṭabarī himself asserts that, although the caliph loved poets and poetry and attracted men of culture and insight, "he hated speculation in religion, and would say, 'It is a thing of no consequence, and most likely there is no merit in it.'"¹²

It is a convenient coincidence that various issues that strained the relation between the pro-Mu'tazilī caliphs and the traditionalists during the *miḥna* are definitively answered by 'ulamā'¹³ who lived in al-Rashīd's time in favor of the orthodox coalition of later times. Mālik b. Anas,¹⁴ Abū Yūsuf al-qāḍī,¹⁵ and 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak¹⁶ are a few of the leading scholars contemporary to al-Rashīd who reportedly not only rejected the createdness creed of the Mu'tazila, but even labeled those who accepted it as unbelievers. Any faction that contradicted the orthodox scholars in the *miḥna* and post-*miḥna* era was

¹² Ṭabarī, III, 741.

¹³ Although the term 'ulamā' is applicable more to a later period, it is used here as a working term for the circle of traditionalist scholars who would be claimed as antecedents by the later 'ulamā'. A similar approach is taken towards terminology such as "Sunna" and "orthodoxy" (Jamā'ī-Sunnī, according to M. Hodgson's terminology).

¹⁴ Khaṭīb, V, 308; *Siyar*, VIII, 101, 102. ¹⁵ *Siyar*, VIII, 538. ¹⁶ *Siyar*, VIII, 403.

hence portrayed as a deviation from the classical times of Hārūn al-Rashīd. To enhance the historical legitimacy of the orthodox position, scholars in the later ninth century invoked the constructed precedent of earlier scholars to show that their opponents (the Mu'tazila) were considered deviant even before al-Ma'mūn's days and the episode of the *miḥna*. In one case, a ḥadīth is directly cited as predicting and criticizing the coming of a faction defending the createdness creed.¹⁷

The orthodox position on the *miḥna* issues was on the whole articulated within an overall opposition to the methods of speculative theology (*kalām*) espoused by the Mu'tazila. To this end, they turned increasingly to relying on ḥadīth as a prime and binding source of religious understanding. Al-Ma'mūn's challenge to the 'ulamā in religious debate often led them to defend their position by citing ḥadīths that contradicted his religious program. Faced with this, the caliph sometimes tried to sustain his argument by continuing to question the authenticity of ḥadīths on the grounds of the sensibility of their contents. The response of the 'ulamā was that the authenticity of ḥadīths rested on the veracity of the chain of transmitters of ḥadīth, irrespective of whether or not ḥadīth content sounded acceptable. The debate between the 'ulamā and the caliph then reached a deadlock. The *miḥna*, often viewed as an argument over an issue of speculative interpretation (the createdness creed) was really a disagreement over the veracity of one method of adducing religious interpretation and, implicitly, legal opinion over another. A dangerously opinionated man when it came to ḥadīth, al-Ma'mūn had to be undermined as a deviant speculator by reference to an idealized past in the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, when harmony prevailed, it was claimed, between the caliph and the 'ulamā.

Whereas al-Ma'mūn chose to surround himself primarily with astrologers, scientists, and Mu'tazilī scholars, and did not shy from challenging ḥadīth in favor of rationalism, al-Rashīd is depicted as a caliph who always gave in to the advice of the 'ulamā, never put non-religious specialists before the 'ulamā, and always accepted ḥadīth as an unquestionable source of legal and spiritual guidance, so long as it was uttered by a *muhaddith*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣḥānī, *Dhikr Akhbār Iṣḥān*, ed. S. Dederling, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1931–34), II, 161; 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Rāfi'ī al-Qazwīnī, *al-Tadwīn fī Akhbār Qazwīn*, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1987), II, 334.

¹⁸ The *muhaddith* Abū Mu'āwiya al-ḍarīr repeated to al-Rashīd a ḥadīth that states: When Moses and Adam met, Moses said, "Are you Adam who drove us out of Paradise?" Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī tells us that a certain Qurashī notable, who happened to be in the entourage of the caliph, commented, "Where did Adam meet Moses?" Hearing this, the caliph reportedly flew into a rage and said, "verily this is a comment from a *zindīq* [a heretic] who disbelieves in the hadith of the Prophet of God." and then demanded, "*al-sayf wa'l-naṭī*", intending to execute the skeptic. Al-Rashīd, we are then told, was only calmed at long last after an earnest intercession by Abū Mu'āwiya himself, who kept saying, "O Commander of the Faithful, surely it was an innocent remark reflecting lack of understanding." (Khaṭīb, XIV, 7; see also Khaṭīb, V, 243, citing a different chain of transmission)

We see, then, that Hārūn's importance in the sources lies in the way he serves as a response to the ways and thoughts of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. His reign forms a brief "Rāshidī" station in 'Abbāsīd history and provides the point of departure for later historians. Or, to put it more accurately, it provides the point of convergence of various later Sunnī religious ideas. Instead of attacking al-Ma'mūn for his Mu'tazilī sympathies directly, the *'ulamā* simply called on the father to perform the wrist-slap on his son, thereby proving their point gently. In one of his many stories about al-Rashīd, Ṭabarī tells us how the caliph was once visited by a famous ascetic of the time, Ibn al-Sammāk. The narrator describes the situation as follows:

Muḥammad b. Hārūn – his father: I was once with al-Rashīd when al-Faḍl b. Rabī' said "Commander of the Faithful, I have brought Ibn al-Sammāk, as you commanded me." "Let him in," he said. He came and al-Rashīd said "Preach to me." Then he said, "Commander of the Faithful, fear God alone, who has no partner, and know that tomorrow you will stand before God, your Lord, and then will be sent to one of two abodes which have no third; the Garden, or the Fire." At this, he wept until his beard was wet. Then al-Faḍl turned to Ibn al-Sammāk and said, "Glory be to God! Does anyone doubt that the Commander of the Faithful will be sent to the Garden, please God, for his upholding of God's truth, and his justice to his servants, and his merit?" Ibn al-Sammāk did not pay attention to this in what he said, but stepped closer to the Commander of the Faithful and said, "Commander of the Faithful, this man [i.e., Faḍl b. Rabī'] will not be with you or by you on that day, so fear God and look to yourself!" Then Hārūn wept until we pitied him, and Faḍl b. Rabī' was hushed and did not utter another word until we went out.¹⁹

The key message in this anecdote lies in the fact that it refutes the Mu'tazilī doctrine of the intermediate stage (*"al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn"*). When the ascetic tells the caliph that his fate shall be one of only two categories, and the caliph accepts his advice wholeheartedly, we face an indirect orthodox criticism of the Mu'tazila and al-Ma'mūn, pronounced by al-Rashīd and an ascetic, the latter perhaps representing a non-partisan religious personality.

The voice of orthodox response comes even more overtly in historical representations of the reigns of the first four caliphs. When the caliph al-Rashīd reportedly asks one of his Qurashī companions, "What do you have to say about those who attack the Caliph 'Uthmān?" the companion answers,

footnote 18 (cont.)

In conjunction with this, we can mention another story told by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī about the caliph's deferential attitude toward the *'ulamā*. The account also quotes Abū Mu'āwiya al-ḍarfīr as saying:

I once had a meal with Hārūn al-Rashīd – Commander of the Faithful – and when we finished, someone I don't know came and poured water on my hands in order to wash. When Hārūn al-Rashīd asked me, "O Abū Mu'āwiya do you know who is pouring water on your hands?" I said, "Verily I don't." [Hārūn] said, "It is I." "You are doing this O Commander of the Faithful?" I protested. He said, "Yes. In reverence for knowledge (*ijlālān li'l-'ilm*)."

¹⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 754. Translation in J. A. Williams (trans.), *Al-Ṭabarī, The Early 'Abbāsī Empire*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1989), II, 309.

“Commander of the Faithful, some attacked him and some were on his side. As for those who attacked him and broke with him, they are the sects of the Shi‘īs, the innovators, and the sects Kharijīs. As for those who side with him, they are the People of the Collectivity even to this day.” Then al-Rashīd said, “I don’t need ever to ask about that matter again after today.”²⁰ Such a query and answer has to be placed against the background of al-Ma’mūn’s reported sympathy with ‘Alī, which led him to declare him as “the best of the *ṣahāba*.” The religious scholar’s way of lumping together various Islamic groups who did not support ‘Uthmān as enemies of ‘Uthmān shows a decisive orthodox reading of the events of the early Islamic period. Al-Rashīd’s abrupt acceptance of the scholar’s answer shows how at times the process of constructing Hārūn’s total support for orthodoxy was not even subtle. That the caliph did not even follow up on his interest in the query underscores the fact that the story served more to prove an ideological historical point, the dismissing of non-Sunnī groups as irrelevant schismatics, than to describe an actual historical incident in the court of Hārūn. The ‘Abbāsīd caliph in many ways appears as a reviver of the ideas and style of the Rāshidūn caliphs, particularly ‘Umar I. A modern reader might be distracted by the image of the joyful caliph scouting the streets of Baghdad, disguised, with his vizir Ja‘far, but although this image provides the setting for many stories describing the masquerading and trifling excursions of Hārūn under the cover of dark, one could say that this style of concealed travel by al-Rashīd probably originated as an imitation of the orthodox image of the caliph ‘Umar I, touring the streets of Medina with his servant Aslam, seeking to check up on the welfare of his subjects.²¹

The ascetic caliph

On the whole, the sources attribute to each of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphs some measure of pious demeanor, deference to the principles of orthodoxy, and admiration for spiritual figures. Al-Rashīd’s situation, however, is markedly different. In stories far outnumbering those of other ‘Abbāsīd caliphs, we are repeatedly told about the caliph’s scrupulous observance of the tenets of Islam, and how sensitive he was to the mildest words of religious advice; one narrator even reckons that Hārūn, along with al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ and Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-zāhid, two leading ascetics of the age, were the three people who wept the most whenever they heard pious invocations (*‘inda al-dhikr*).²² Ascetic scholars suddenly start to make frequent contact with the caliphal court in Hārūn’s reign, and they consistently receive a special welcome by the caliph, who graciously accepted their criticisms of his court and position of power. And even though we know that *zuhd* (asceticism) was never a strong point in Hārūn’s lifestyle, the sources insist that the caliph held this

²⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 749. Translation in Williams, *‘Abbāsī Empire*, II, 305.

²¹ Ṭabarī, III, 2744–45. ²² Khaṭīb, XIV, 8; *Siyar*, VIII, 374.

quality in high regard, and probably regretted not living more frugally.²³ Ṭabarī, whose accounts often imply this, illustrates the point in the following manner. He states that on one occasion the caliph summoned to him the ascetic Ibn al-Sammāk for general religious advice. At one point during their conference, al-Rashīd asked a page for a drink of water. The pitcher was brought to him.

But when he tipped it up to his mouth in order to drink from it, Ibn al-Sammāk said to him, "Wait a moment, Commander of the Faithful, and tell me, by your kinship with the Messenger of God! If this drink of water were to be withheld from you, how much would you purchase it for?" He replied, "For half of my kingdom." He said, "Drink, may God refresh you." When he had drunk, Ibn al-Sammāk asked him, "I ask you in the name of your kinship to the Messenger of God, if you were prevented from passing that drink of water from out of your body, what would you pay to get rid of it?" He replied, "All my kingdom." Then Ibn al-Sammāk told the caliph, "A kingdom whose value is only a drink of water isn't, indeed, worth aspiring to [or contending over, *allā yunāfasa fīhī!*]" At this Hārūn wept. Al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī' then gestured to Ibn al-Sammāk to depart, so the latter left.²⁴

The above story's focus on the tension over drinking water constitutes part of a complex political metaphor that permeates the historiography of the medieval caliphate. The caliph's holding of the cup and his discussion of the possibility of drinking bears a significance whose meaning can only be appreciated later on, in the context of al-Amīn's tragedy (see chapter 3). In another and more direct way, however, this anecdote serves the purpose of demonstrating Hārūn's religious sensitivity. Ibn al-Sammāk's queries successfully elicit the correct pattern of response from the caliph, leading to the central point that kingship and the imperial domain are truly ephemeral trappings. Hārūn knows that, and does not need much educating to deprecate the pretensions and temptations of power. His response stems partly from an innate sense of wisdom that accompanies his Hashemite identity, but also reflects a pietistic conviction submerged in his personality. The ascetic is posited in the narrative as the independent religious self of Hārūn, assuring the community that the caliph's appearances are not a true statement of his beliefs and disposition. Hārūn is in power unintentionally and without any prior planning.²⁵ His genuine religious feelings and natural will, the text implies, are trapped in the office of the caliphate, which forces him to adopt religiously questionable political methods at times. Eventually this mixed portrayal of al-Rashīd leads to a situation that is as tragic as it is ironic, whereby despite the profound religious criticisms of the ascetic, Hārūn ultimately emerges as a religious hero. That Hārūn never managed to attain his admitted ideal of austerity and devotedness forces the reader to sympathize with the caliph's "existentialist" predicament, to assume that if only the caliph had not

²³ *Murūj*, IV, 227; Abu al-Qāsim Ḥamza al-Sahmī, *Ta'rikh Jurjān* (Beirut, 1987), 328.

²⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 755. Translation drawn from Williams, *Abbāsi Empire*, II, 309, and Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 323; Khaṭīb, V, 372; Qazwīnī, *al-Tadwīn*, II, 456–57.

²⁵ See the circumstances of al-Rashīd's accession below, pp. 41–42, 148–49.

been thrust into the political spotlight because of historical chance, he would have led a truly spiritual life.

Ibn al-Sammāk's visit and advice to al-Rashīd forms part of a recognizable genre of caliph-scholar interaction in the sources. The format usually runs as follows: an eminent religious scholar who has few or no ties with the state is brought before the caliph to offer his educating comments. Suddenly, the scholar takes the opportunity to make some harsh criticism of kingship and political authority in general. The scholar briskly evokes the theme of death and the horrors of the afterlife, and describes the tragic transiency of human life. "Commander of the Faithful," an ascetic would declare, "you die alone, get buried alone, resurrected alone, and judged alone . . . The mighty and glorious are but a few moments away from becoming worthless dust . . . It is but a moment before the senses fall silent . . . Recall the Day when you come before the Almighty, and stand between paradise and the hell fire. You will then have left behind you the indulgent ignorant, and come only to find the guilty and depressed." Here the caliph breaks into tears ("until he wipes his eyes with his sleeve"),²⁶ while a close courtier (significantly a vizir) steps in to scold the pious guest for spoiling the occasion by saddening the caliph. Challenged by this response, which could not possibly be assigned to the caliph, the ascetic steps up his criticism, this time specifically alerting the caliph to the dangerous influence of his advisors and commanders. "They have but used you as a ladder for their desires and ambitions . . . verily this wall might be more useful for the Commander of the Faithful than you,"²⁷ 'Amr b. 'Ubayd tells al-Manšūr's advisor, Sulaymān b. Mujālid, as he confers with al-Manšūr. "Let your *mawālī* be the ones who revel in sumptuous garments," Ibn al-Sammāk tells al-Rashīd, "and you be humble to God . . . and look after your subjects (*ra'iyya*), many of whom nightly sleep while in the throes of hunger."²⁸ The scholar addresses part of his advice to the vizir, alerting him to the responsibility of his office. The story then ends with the caliph's offer of a gift and the scholar's rejection of it. Model stories such as these can be found for both al-Rashīd and al-Manšūr.²⁹ Interestingly the language of these advice sessions is couched in universal terms of religious asceticism. There is little reference in them to aspects of Islamic dogma, and much emphasis on ideal human values, the responsibility of a just ruler, and the magnitude of man's fall in the afterlife.³⁰

²⁶ An analogous phrasing in the case of al-Amīn. See p. 78 below.

²⁷ *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 143. A similar version that involves a dialogue between 'Amr b. 'Ubayd and al-Mahdī in the presence of al-Manšūr is provided by Balādhurī, *Banū al-'Abbās*, 231–32. Balādhurī includes a range of such flattering anecdotes centering on Ibn 'Ubayd and al-Manšūr: Balādhurī, *Banū al-'Abbās*, 231–35. Khaṭīb, XII, 167–78.

²⁸ *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 370.

²⁹ Note the similar encounter between al-Rashīd and al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ. Aḥmad b. 'Abdallāh Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'*, 10 vols. (Cairo, 1932–38), VIII, 105–07. See also *Siyar*, VIII, 374, 532.

³⁰ Ibn al-Sammāk and al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ exemplify this ascetic-pietistic current of universal morality. Theirs is a current of early Muslim spirituality that was independent of the *fuqahā'* and *muhaddithūn*. There is a gnostic quality that characterizes the discourse of both of these scholars (see Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'*, VIII, 87).

Whether or not al-Rashīd was genuinely pious cannot be established easily from the sources. The caliph's personality has been lost beneath layers of embellishment, tendentiousness, and hagiography. But even without knowing if his image is contrived, we are still faced with the question of why the sources chose this caliph and not another to deliver this image of wholesome pietism. There are various reasons for this, the most important being that al-Rashīd's personality and achievements do lend themselves to dramatic enhancement. Unlike other caliphs, al-Rashīd made a point of advertising much of his activity, especially that dealing with pious matters. He tried to inculcate the image of a royal routine that was ceremonial, visible, and oriented to the public. His regular journeys on pilgrimage and his military expeditions against the Byzantines are usually the first examples that come to mind. But there are other manifestations. Unlike his predecessors, al-Rashīd made a habit of dividing his residence every year between Baghdad and Raqqa. These journeys may have had the political purpose of reconciling the 'Abbāsīd regime with the Arab power bases in the Umayyad heartland, but in monarchical terms the journeys were also intended to develop the public profile of the caliph.

Al-Rashīd played on the public's curiosity with particular shows of royal extravagance, and periodically made direct contact with his subjects. These two aspects form the historical essence of the myriad of mythic stories that eventually developed around him. Religious historiography eventually restricted his social encounters to those with the *'ulamā'*, while secularist discussions (as in the works of Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī and the *Thousand and One Nights*) made al-Rashīd accessible to every fortune-seeking poet and jester between the Nile and the Oxus. Perhaps the most prominent example of the caliph's devotion to projecting a grand royal image occurred toward the end of his life in his dealings with Khurāsān. Al-Rashīd's journey to Khurāsān in 809 (AH 193) to suppress the rebellion of Rāfi' b. al-Layth tends to be eclipsed by the ensuing events of the civil war. However, the trip in itself was very significant, for this was the first time a caliph had undertaken a visit to Khurāsān. The appearance of the representative of the messianic *dawla* in Khurāsān no doubt carried a special political and psychological meaning. For a century, the eastern lands of the caliphate had exhibited a profound degree of support to chiliastic causes and a particular sympathy to the Hashemite family. None except a handful who joined the revolution in the central lands, however, had come to recognize the 'Abbāsīd *imām* first hand or to appreciate the specific divergencies between the 'Alids and 'Abbāsīds. After the recurrence of syncretistic Khurāsānī rebellions between 750 and 809, the caliph decided finally to use his own appearance as a charismatic counterweight to other rebellious pretensions. The journey to the east was undertaken slowly, not on account of the caliph's illness, but to enhance the sense of public anxiety about the imminent appearance of the caliph and to redirect social and religious hopes in that region back to the Prophetic house-

hold.³¹ It was a new 'Abbāsīd political strategy for dealing with Khurāsān's inclination to messianic revolt.

The presence of the caliph at the helm of military expeditions was therefore largely symbolic, and his journeys to and from the Byzantine frontier probably generated more news than the outcome of the campaigns themselves. 'Abbāsīd clashes with the Byzantines under al-Rashīd were carefully controlled campaigns that were never intended to turn into full-fledged wars between the powers. The caliph's choice of the Byzantine front to exhibit his zeal for the faith was not only due to its proximity and strategic value, but also because the enterprise of conquest there boasted a romantic historical pedigree stretching back to the era of the Rāshidūn caliphate. To many of the pious-minded who were disillusioned with the results of the 'Abbāsīd revolution and the course of Islamic politics, the Byzantine frontier provided an escape where they could spread Islam or die in battle. In this period, we notice for the first time the emergence of a new community of ascetics converging on towns such as Ṭarsūs, Maṣṣīṣa, and Malāṭya, where they settled in fortresses and frontier towns and joined 'Abbāsīd expeditions during the raid season.³²

Due to such policies and pietistic propaganda, al-Rashīd became an imagined ideal ruler, not only in achievement but in personality. Instead of composing didactic treatises of the "mirror for princes" genre that directly spelled out their view on the nature of Islamic leadership, the 'ulamā' turned to the reigns of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs to illustrate various moral and political themes. Their descriptions of al-Rashīd's deference to the 'ulamā', his willingness to travel in search of ḥadīth, and his eagerness to educate his children al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn at the hands of scholars were intended to illustrate the ideal relation between caliph and religious scholars (ḥadīth scholars, primarily).³³

This picture of the 'ulamā' standing in a superior position to the caliph and dispensing criticisms on his leadership, however, was one that included some contradictions. While the 'ulamā' give themselves the right to critique the caliph and gladly show how their admonishments worked, they seem reluctant to extend the same right of pietistic criticism to ordinary members of society. Hence when a Muslim commoner steps up to the caliph on one occasion and berates him in the traditional style of blunt religious criticism, the sources side with the caliph, allowing him to defend himself in religious terms, and successfully. Political leadership ceases to be the tainted and sinful position that

³¹ Of significant relevance here are C. Geertz's observations on the monarchical techniques of travel in the realm to mark their association with the land and direct personal hegemony, "like [a] wolf or tiger spreading his scent through his territory, as almost physically part of [him]" (C. Geertz "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," *Culture and its Creators: Essays in honor of E. Shils*, ed. J. N. Ben-David and T. N. Clark [London and Chicago, 1977], 153).

³² For such figures, see, Abū Nu'aym, *Akhbār Ishbahān*, II, 177; *Siyar*, IX, 561, 585; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rīkh al-Islām wa Wafayāt al-Mashāhīr wa'l-A'lām*, ed. 'Umar Tadmūrī (Beirut, 1990), XII, 142; M. Bonner, "Some Observations concerning the Early Development of Jihād on the Arab-Byzantine Frontier," *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992), 30.

³³ For examples of such stories, see Khaṭīb, IX, 416-17; *Siyar*, IX, 47 and VIII, 429, 498.

the *‘ulamā’* elsewhere so thoroughly discredit. The following anecdote shows this reversal in roles and moralistic standards. In the account of an anonymous narrator, we are told:

I was with al-Rashīd at Raqqa, after he left Baghdad, and went out one day to hunt with the Caliph. Then a certain ascetic came up and began thus: “O Hārūn, fear God!” Hārūn then said to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Uthmān b. Nahīk, “Take this man in until I can get away to talk to him.” When he returned, he called for his lunch, and ordered that the man be fed his own special foods. When he had eaten and drunk, he sent for the man and said, “Friend, will you share some discourse and questions with me?” “That is the least that is due you,” said the man. “Then tell me,” Hārūn asked “Am I, or Pharaoh, the worst and most wicked?” “Pharaoh, certainly” the ascetic replied, “for he said, ‘I am your Lord, the Most High,’ and said ‘I do not know that you have any God but me.’” “You speak truly,” said the Caliph. “And now tell me, who is better, you or Moses?” “Moses, who was addressed by God and chosen,” the man replied. “God chose him to be His follower, and favored him with His revelation, and spoke directly to him, from among all His creation.” “True,” said the Caliph. “Do you not also know that when God sent Moses and his brother to Pharaoh, He told them, ‘Yet speak to him gently, perchance he will pay attention, or fear?’” The Qur’an commentators hold that He ordered them to use Pharaoh’s title of respect, even though he was in his insolence and his tyranny, as you have learned. But then you come to me, who am in such a state as you know – I perform the greater part of God’s commands to me, and I worship none but Him. I stand within His larger limits, and His orders and prohibitions. Yet still you have admonished me with the harshest and most infamous expression, and the roughest, most terrifying words. It is not with God’s politeness that you corrected me, nor with the behavior of the righteous that you have acted, so what made you sure you were not putting yourself within my power? Thus you expose yourself to what you could have saved yourself from.” At this, the ascetic replied, “I have erred, Commander of the Faithful, I beg your pardon.” “Then God has pardoned you,” the Caliph said, and he ordered that he be given twenty thousand dirhams.³⁴

The orthodox voice in this story clearly comes from the caliphal side. The message here is twofold: first, that severe criticism of the caliph cannot be raised against the caliph as long as he upholds the main tenets of Islam; second, and more importantly, that the realm of religious criticism is not a channel open to any disapproving religious observer.³⁵ Only those steeped in

³⁴ Tabarī, III, 756. Translation in Williams, *‘Abbāsī Empire*, II, 310.

³⁵ Al-Rashīd’s story, we should note, both differs from and resembles the wellknown story describing a similar incident involving to the caliph ‘Umar I. At the time, ‘Umar, while giving a Friday *khuṭba*, found himself being interrupted by someone in the congregation protesting and saying, “*Ittaqī allāh*” (fear God). When those present then rebuked the man for his remark, the caliph intervened and said, “Verily he would be lacking in virtue if he did not say it, and we would be lacking as well if we did not accept to hear it.” The ending of this story is fundamentally modified to suit a new orthodox position, and the message of ‘Umar’s story is relegated to a purely religious sense. The lesson from ‘Umar’s story is no longer that public criticism of the leader is permissible, but is merely meant to show how ‘Umar, so upright in his other behavior, also manifests saintliness in accepting criticism with an open heart. ‘Umar’s story is also reversed in one centered on al-Manṣūr: Tabarī, III, 428; Balādhurī, *Banū al-‘Abbās*, 194; Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh*, II, 388; Khaṭīb, X, 56.

religious knowledge have the prerogative to critique the ruler and reject his gifts. Others have to abide by the rule of the caliph and accept his leadership, because it is a religious leadership in its own way. Islamic political leadership is in a delicate position that should not be challenged for fear of jeopardizing the very security of the religion itself. The world is not divided between the perfectly virtuous and the evil, Moses and Pharaoh, but is more complex and deserves patient assessment. A pietistic call for quick and thorough solutions is not only out of touch with reality, but in conflict with the moralistic nuances of the Qur'ānic paradigm of how to deal with tyrants.

These portraits, especially the latter, of the caliph show us an organized legal thinking about political questions that reflects a mature, post-*fitna* perspective on the separation between political and religious authority. Hārūn was selected as the focus of these imagined debates to define these boundaries on authority, but ironically his political authority was allowed to tower so greatly that the sphere of religious authority was rendered secondary. His reign represented the pivotal moment of the state in its glory, leading audiences to view him in a role parallel to that of Solomon. And, indeed, one can find many shades of similarity in the posture of these two individuals and their temperament, as well as in some of their deeds (such as the commitment to conquest, *ghazw*) and in their being the object of divine guidance (particularly through the gift of wisdom). One may even hypothesize that in origin the caliph's sense of self-perception may have fostered such a linkage. Had he not been dubbed, from a young age, "al-khalīfa al-marḍī" ("he with whom God is pleased")³⁶ in a style that echoed Solomon's early epithet "the beloved of God"? Or could he have not viewed his rivalry with the Byzantine empress Irene as a parallel to Solomon's conquest of the queen of Sheba? The story of Hārūn's life illustrates this tenuous line between the reality afforded by few historical facts and the potentialities that these lent to narrators eager to craft a drama with cyclical overtones. Narratives were not invented in isolation from all reality of the age but in dialogue, extension, and response to the caliph's career of power.

Star-crossed families: the 'Abbāsīd and the Barmakīd

In addition to serving as a model of orthodox beliefs and behavior, Hārūn's personality and reign are projected as a critical point of historical departure for understanding the conflict between his sons that emerged after his death. Looking back to the reign of al-Rashīd in search for answers, and a logical background for this conflict, may seem natural in light of the fact that it was al-Rashīd who drafted the notorious plan of succession that created the troubling atmosphere of rivalry between the brothers. This causal link in the political history, however, is not what most preoccupied chroniclers when they

³⁶ M. Bonner, "Al-Khalīfa al-Marḍī: the Accession of Hārūn Al-Rashīd," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988), 79–92.

explored al-Rashīd's reign. To medieval chroniclers, the reigns of al-Rashīd, al-Amīn, and al-Ma'mūn represented an integrated stretch of familial, political, and social history in which the change in one reign heralded profound change in the other.

The rivalry between the brothers had to be taken back to the reign of al-Rashīd because their fates were viewed as intertwined from childhood and decreed from before their births. This perspective of the conflict as predestined is best illustrated in an anecdote that survives in the works of Dīnawarī, Mas'ūdī, and Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī. The anecdote describes al-Rashīd being visited by a prominent literary figure of the time.³⁷ Proud of the blossoming talents of the two young princes, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, the caliph sought to display them to the scholar for a literary test. The narrator recounts:

They [i.e., al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn] soon after entered together like two stars on the horizon decorated by tranquility and majesty. They were looking down in modesty and walking in short steps until they stood at the entrance of the audience chamber. Then they greeted their father by the caliphal title and said prayers for his prosperity. He then ordered them to approach. So they did, and he put Muḥammad [al-Amīn] to his right and 'Abdallāh [al-Ma'mūn] to his left. The caliph then invited me to have them recite passages from the Qur'an and to ask them some questions. They replied to all of these in the most satisfactory manner . . . Delighted at his children's success, the caliph then asked Kisā'ī to comment on their performance. Having found them equally prepared, knowledgeable, and of keen memory, the literary scholar told the caliph, "I have never seen among the children of caliphs and in the branches of this blessed [family] tree, any children more eloquent or knowledgeable." He characterized the brothers as "two moons of majesty," and concluded by saying prayers for their well-being, to which al-Rashīd said "Amen," and hugged them both together in a single long embrace, at the end of which tears flowed on his chest. When the two children left, al-Rashīd turned to the scholar and told him, "What to do when fate has befallen them; hostility is born among them and grows into conflict, and blood is shed until many will wish that they both were among the dead." When al-Rashīd is then asked, "Is this [i.e., the conflict] something shown by signs at their birth or a tradition transmitted from men of religion," he responds, "Verily it is something recounted by the sages [*al-ʿulamāʾ*] from those chosen [*al-awṣiyāʾ*] from the prophets [*al-anbiyāʾ*]." ³⁸

On the surface this anecdote, which we shall call "Hārūn's Premonition of the Civil War," conveys a hagiographic view, showing the 'Abbāsid caliphs as capable of foretelling the future. Awareness of the coming conflict highlighted

³⁷ Aṣma'ī according to Dīnawarī, but Kisā'ī according to Mas'ūdī and Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī.

³⁸ Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-Akhbār al-Tiwāl*, ed. V. Guirgass (Leiden, 1888), 384–85; *Murūj*, 211–12; Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad b. A'tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, ed. A. Shīrī, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1991), VIII, 387–89. Dīnawarī adds in his version, "It is reported that al-Ma'mūn used to say, during his reign, al-Rashīd had heard all that was to happen between us [i.e., with al-Amīn] from Mūsā b. Ja'far [al-Ṣādiq]. Thus he said what he did." Dīnawarī's additional comment has to be placed and understood in light of al-Ma'mūn's nomination of 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā for succession in AH 201.

the caliph's authority as a religious guide.³⁹ The application of this idea to Hārūn and the context of civil war between his sons, however, conveys a range of other connotations that may not all be compatible with the pro-caliphal propagandistic line. Taking an objective, descriptive approach, the anecdote shuns the stark, polarized representation of the brothers that comes across in many of the pro-Ma'mūnid narratives. The account casts the conflict as a mere working of fate. Both brothers are shown as the unwitting key players in a tragic historic episode that is inevitable. As children, the brothers are depicted as equals in knowledge, behavior, and manners. The two harbor no ill feelings toward one another, and the caliph can find no flaw in them.

Aside from limiting and humanizing Hārūn's persona, this account was in another way intended to open up some points of religio-philosophical tension that relate to deeply felt moral challenges. For, although the predestinarian spirit of the account as well as Hārūn's resignation to it are highly orthodox themes, and although the reconciliatory image of the brothers extracts the 'Abbāsīd family from responsibility for the war in a helpful way, one is left wondering why these brothers – so equal, meritorious, and innocent in their youth – could become the conduits to political disaster. In brief, why would the blessed reign of the 'Abbāsīds be interrupted, why would evil infiltrate a virtuous order, and why would pain haunt the community? Viewed from the later orthodox historical view of the ninth century, there was no explanation for this except through interpreting the episode as a trial that tests the faith of the community or fulfills a transcendent purpose. At an elementary level, one could read in the anecdote the lesson that, just as the caliph with all his wisdom and power resigns himself to the plan of destiny, so should the believer refrain from challenging the course of history.

The portrait of Hārūn and his children, as well as much of the narrative of the civil war, however, was intended by the chroniclers to be examined in relation to the story of the Barmakid family, particularly the tragedy of their downfall. In this account, Hārūn experiences an emotionally traumatic state that contrasts with his more familiar political side, from which he dealt with various challenges to the state. It is significant that these sentiments are shown disclosed not only in a state of near loneliness, but in a climate of darkness that symbolizes the nature of the coming chapter. Here he expresses his anguish over a tragedy in a manner that will parallel Yaḥyā's coming agony over the Barmakid tragedy, a tragedy which Hārūn delivers while living through the other realistic sphere of his conscience. Hārūn's emotional state therefore is here evolving in a mode that is parallel to and responsive to the evolution of Yaḥyā's history. It is a moment as much intended for the reader to note its ironic value as it is a necessary judgmental antecedent to the coming fall of the Barmakids.

³⁹ The caliph al-Manṣūr, for example, is shown informing his companions of the emergence of one of his progeny (al-Amīn) who will bring about a phase of conflict and ruin: *Murūj*, IV, 269.

It was imperative that Hārūn learn of the forthcoming civil war before he died so that he could appreciate the anguish of Yaḥyā over the murder of Jaʿfar, the eventual vindication of the Barmakids, and the correlation between these events that became synchronous in Hārūn's experience both in a shadowy and concrete way. Much as the Barmakids suffered an undeserved fate, so did the ʿAbbāsīd brothers become victims to a tragedy that was the response of fate to the arbitrary cruelty of Hārūn toward the Barmakids. The fragile credibility of the various suggested reasons explaining Hārūn's motives for sacking the Barmakids (examined below) is specifically intended in the narratives to isolate and highlight the brazen injustice that Hārūn committed. Although hailed as an orthodox personality in one dimension of his character, Hārūn has a more controversial character as the subject of a negative moral. Hārūn can be accepted as a legitimate ruler but, like the other ʿAbbāsīd caliphs, he is obliquely rebuked in the sources for becoming overconfident in his power.

Ever since Sasanian times, Islamic sources tell us, it was considered the prime duty of a monarch to govern his subjects with equity and to refrain from abusing his power or imagining himself to be divine. The weakness of a monarch's subjects mirrored on a cosmological level the weakness of humanity toward God, who had laid out an ethical system, the principle of reward and punishment, and above all highlighted the rights of the weak and the disenfranchised. In this system, justice stood as a sacred principle to be observed in all situations of hierarchy (family, tribe, state, army, bureaucracy) and authority, and it fell upon those in power to see that equity and fairness prevailed and that hierarchy did not degenerate into a spiteful domination of the weak. Hārūn may have briefly felt his power fully consolidated by eliminating the Barmakids, but without a justifying reason this move was one of sheer hegemony. A particularly sinister mood floats over the psyche of Hārūn as we go through the episode of the Barmakid downfall which starkly contrasts with his earlier personality during his years as a youthful heir apparent. The "happy indifference"⁴⁰ that characterized his attitude at that time towards his political fortune is replaced by a more determined approach toward garnering all aspects of political power. In the process we are led to see a new image of caliphal arbitrariness which slowly prepares the way for his own tragedy. Yaḥyā, unlike Hārūn, recognizes the deadly sin emanating from this hubristic act, and knows that this unfair move against a family that had served the caliphate with dedication signaled future divine punishment of the ruler and the eventual vindication of the Barmakids and of Persia in general.⁴¹

In a last-minute request for pardon before the summary punishments, Yaḥyā wrote to the caliph pleading, "O Commander of the faithful, if there is a particular case of guilt, then do not extend your punishment to everyone, for I surely hold the affection of a father to you." To this al-Rashīd's only reply

⁴⁰ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 83.

⁴¹ Jahshiyārī, 253.

was to write in the margin of the same letter, "The matter that [the two of] you debate has been decided." Al-Rashīd's statement here is a quotation of a Qur'ānic verse that recounts the response Joseph made to inquiries of dream interpretation during his imprisonment. Later narrators were to use the same verse again in the narrative of al-Amīn's downfall in a dialogical situation with Yaḥyā's situation here. When al-Amīn, during a meeting with Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī in the final days of the siege of Baghdad, asked his uncle if he heard voices from the Tigris prophesying imminent defeat, Ibrāhīm denied hearing anything and assured his nephew that his rule would last long. At that point the mysterious voice finally declared: "The matter you debate has been decided." Al-Amīn's tragedy is interlocked with Yaḥyā's. Hārūn tries to claim the divine word in his response to Yaḥyā – and maintain the congruence between his path to power and Joseph's – but his action is ironically subverted when the divine voice reasserts itself in the end alone, outside the Joseph narrative, and prophesies al-Amīn's downfall.

Thus the story of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn and of Hārūn's role in laying the groundwork for a potential conflict (the succession plans) is in large part elaborated as the answer of fate to Hārūn's reckless sacking of the Barmakids. Whether in the atmosphere of prosperity and harmony or in the later phase of tragedy, the fates of the two families, the Barmakid and the 'Abbāsīd, were thoroughly intertwined. A close examination of the representation of members of the two families shows some symmetrical approaches of depiction, whereby the personality of Hārūn corresponds to that of Yaḥyā, al-Amīn to Ja'far, and al-Ma'mūn to al-Faḍl. Anecdotes about the piety, generosity, or frivolity of this member or that in either family may seem realistic, but in fact are intended primarily to illustrate aspects of secular or religious morality personified by these characters.

Polarized stories of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn were embellished and planted in al-Rashīd's reign not only to furnish a background for understanding the causes of conflict between the 'Abbāsīd brothers or to legitimize al-Ma'mūn's challenge against al-Amīn, but also to show how the careers of the 'Abbāsīd brothers paralleled those of the Barmakid brothers. Both al-Ma'mūn and al-Faḍl are therefore represented as reserved in disposition and as truly pious individuals who refused to partake of wine or join wine parties and who were committed to a code of dignified behavior.⁴² They repeatedly stress the importance of social honor and the need to maintain the stability of the hierarchical order as well as its culture. Ja'far and al-Amīn, in contrast, appear as troubled sons who thought of life as one long blast of sensual indulgence. Never missing a wine party, always lavishing excessive gifts on poets, and consorting with and consulting marginal people of inferior rank instead of associating with the *'ulamā'*, Ja'far and al-Amīn illustrate a lifestyle that is as frivolous as it is

⁴² *Murūj*, IV, 194. In the end, both also met their deaths in a place called Raqqa (Mas'ūdī states that when al-Ma'mūn, while in his final illness, asked his aides to translate the name of the place where he had settled inside the Byzantine frontier, he was told it meant Raqqa).

devoid of any contemplation or decency. Ultimately, the two are similar in the way they meet gruesome deaths, and their corpses are put on display in the public areas of Baghdad. These personality flaws dictate the ensuing logic of punishment, even though the party responsible for meting out this punishment will become itself the target of a retaliatory process that draws a tenuous line between ending one moral failing and the risk of starting another.⁴³

Both fathers, Yaḥyā and Hārūn, appear more inclined toward the virtuous, noble-spirited, and pious son, and are severely critical of the impious son. Each tried to give parental advice, but the son would not listen, thereby letting his personality flaws lead to his demise. Yaḥyā at times is shown making statements that indirectly criticize Jaʿfar's excessive familiarity with the caliph, such as when he says, "*al-dālla tufsid l-ḥurma l-qadīma*,"⁴⁴ responding to a plea Jaʿfar would later make at the moment of his arrest,⁴⁵ but on other occasions Yaḥyā addressed Jaʿfar directly. Exasperated by the vanity of Jaʿfar, Yaḥyā once tried to warn his son before it was too late, telling him, "I shall do no more than leave you to your own until one day fate will present you with a trial (*athra*). Alas, I only fear that from this you will find no recovery."⁴⁶ Al-Rashīd, on the other hand, never sat down for a serious talk with al-Amīn, but neither did he cease to complain to al-Amīn's mother, Zubayda, about the selfish and frivolous behavior of her son. In the end, both fathers found themselves equally lamenting the tragedies of their wayward sons.

The chronicles seem to push the reader to associate the fates of the Barmakid and ʿAbbāsīd families particularly over the tragedies of al-Amīn and Jaʿfar. When Yaḥyā was informed that the caliph had murdered Jaʿfar and ruined the household of the Barmakids, for example, we are told that he commented, "So shall his son be killed . . . [and] so shall his palaces be destroyed,"⁴⁷ prophesying the fate of al-Amīn and the civil war. Reportedly, when Masrūr told al-Rashīd about Yaḥyā's observation, the caliph worried, for as he put it, "Yaḥyā rarely told me things that did not prove true."⁴⁸

Apart from this direct cautioning statement by Yaḥyā, the sources do not openly connect the fates of the Barmakids and ʿAbbāsīds. They do so obliquely, through stylistic and thematic allusion and ironic phrases. These devices are woven around a symmetrical construction of personalities, where symmetry applies not only to the qualities of the personalities involved, but

⁴³ Faint references in the sources point to the prideful personality of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā (Jahshiyārī, 198). Al-Faḍl is generally praised for his generous deeds and sober demeanor; however, his pride is said to have been risky. The sources do not elaborate on this point in the manner they illustrate al-Amīn's and Jaʿfar's flaws which may point to the possibility that this question was exaggerated by later observers to ascribe an ethical reason to al-Faḍl's fall.

⁴⁴ Jahshiyārī, 202.

⁴⁵ Jahshiyārī tells us that when Masrūr came with al-Rashīd's orders to Jaʿfar on the execution night, Jaʿfar told him, "O Abū Hāshim, what about the sanctity of [faithfulness] and the intimate tie (*al-ḥurma wa'l-mawadda*)?" but Masrūr said, "I find no recourse in this matter" (Jahshiyārī, 234). ⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 676.

⁴⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 683. The narrator of the remark is Muḥammad b. Ishāq.

⁴⁸ Jahshiyārī, 254, as narrated by Muḥammad b. Ishāq.

also to the historical situation in which they might find themselves. Apart from the analogy between the fates of al-Amīn and Ja'far, the most prominent level of symmetry is between the fathers. Hārūn and Yaḥyā provide two different illustrations of orthodox thought and belief. The vocabulary of their religious language may vary in a way that reflects ironically on the identity, achievements, or fate of each, but in the end the discourse of both is compatible in orthodox terms. Each addresses a set of key moral and religious values, and each is constructed to represent a focal point of orthodox beliefs and practices. Indeed, at times, the statements and actions of the two figures appear closely tied in form and substance. Consider, for example, the similarity in the following stories about the two. The first describes a visit by al-Rashīd to the Ka'ba. It states:

When he [i.e., al-Rashīd] made the pilgrimage, [he] entered the Ka'ba, stood on his toes, and prayed,

O You who possess the needs of all seekers, and know the secret thoughts of the silent, for every request made of You there is a response made ready, an answer at hand; for every mute, there is encompassing wisdom eloquent of Your trustworthy promises, Your noble assistance, Your great mercy. Bless Muḥammad, and the family of Muḥammad, pardon us our sins, and do forgive our transgressions, O You Whom sins do not hurt, from Whom faults are not hidden, and Whom pardon of misdeeds does not diminish, You Who have surrounded the earth with waters, and contained the air by the heavens, and chosen for Himself the names; bless Muḥammad and be propitious to me in all my reign. O You // before whom voices are lowered in every dialect of language asking for needs, my need is that you pardon me when I die and go to my grave-niche, and my folk and my children are separated from me. O my God to you be praise excelling all praise, even as You excel all Your creation: O God, bless Muḥammad as You bless those with whom you are well-pleased; bless Muḥammad with the blessing of Your protection; reward him beyond us all in things last and nearest; O God, let us live happy and die martyrs, and render us happy in Your Sustenance, not wretched ones deprived (*ashqiyā' maḥrūmūn*)!⁴⁹

Al-Rashīd's image in the above story bears a striking resemblance to the image of Yaḥyā in the following story. Again, on the occasion of a pilgrimage, Yaḥyā figures in the following story. Mūsā b. Yaḥyā states: "My father went to perform the Circumambulation of the Ka'ba in the year in which he was afflicted, and I was with him, from among his sons. He seized hold of the veil of the Ka'ba, and began to pray, saying, 'O God, my sins are a mighty number, whom none but You may count, and none but You may know. O my God, if You would punish me, then let my punishment be in this world, though it encompass my hearing and my sight, my wealth and my children, until I attain Your blessing, but do not punish me in the next world.'"⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 751. Translation in Williams, *Abbāsī Empire*, II, 307.

⁵⁰ Jahshiyārī, 222; Ṭabarī, III, 674.

The story is then complemented in an account that immediately follows in Ṭabarī's chronicle, when a certain Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. Ḥarb relates:

I saw Yaḥyā standing before the House of God. He had taken hold of the curtains of the Ka'ba and was saying, "O my God, // if it is Your good pleasure to bereave me of Your grace to me, bereave me. If it is Your good pleasure to bereave me of my family and my children, then take them, my God, except for Faḍl." He turned away to go, until he came to the door of the mosque, and then came back hurriedly, and again took hold of the curtain and began to say, "O my God, it is inappropriate for one like me to make request of You, and then make exceptions, and so Lord God . . . Faḍl too."⁵¹

The symmetry between the two anecdotes goes beyond merely showing a shared mood of pietism. The prayers of Yaḥyā and Hārūn have to be placed in light of the anxiety and melancholy of both fathers about the fate of their sons. Both fathers represent points of departure for understanding an orthodox moral in 'Abbāsīd history. When Yaḥyā states in a resigned tone, "Faḍl too," we are presented with an exemplary orthodox attitude that exhorts the believer to acquiesce and be patient in times of hardship. Yaḥyā's situation provides an Iranian adaptation of the story of Jacob and that prophet's famous resignation to suffering. The vizir seems to have premonitions of imminent disaster, but he cannot, nor perhaps does he want to, actively avert the danger. He accepts the potential threat from the caliph, since the latter deserves obedience both in his capacity as a Hashemite and as a monarch. From an orthodox perspective, al-Rashīd represented to Yaḥyā no more than the instrument of divine trial. There is no need to preempt the threat, for the caliph, acting unjustly as he is, shall receive his own share of pain and justice in due time through the escalating trouble with Khurāsān and the eventual polarization within the 'Abbāsīd household (note al-Rashīd's discussion with Aṣma'ī on p. 32 above).

While Yaḥyā does not target Hārūn or any other individual in his prayers (which he might, considering that the narrator shows Yaḥyā anticipating a calamity), one notices that Yaḥyā's silent perseverance and prayers are shown answered in an elliptical way. When Yaḥyā prays that his son al-Faḍl may be exempted from punishment and then retracts his statement, one might at first note how al-Faḍl, like his father and brother, was not spared in the Barmakid tragedy – although he escaped the fate of Ja'far. A symbolic reflection on Yaḥyā's statements, "except Faḍl" and then "Faḍl too," however, can show that in a way the prayer was answered in a roundabout way affecting another Persian aristocrat from the Barmakid circle. For while it is true that al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā was punished, we know that later another al-Faḍl, namely al-Faḍl b. Sahl, a bureaucrat initially introduced to al-Rashīd by Yaḥyā,⁵² eventually succeeded the Barmakids in the role of vizir. As vizir to al-Ma'mūn during the

⁵¹ Ṭabarī, III, 674–75; Williams, 'Abbāsī Empire, II, 245.

⁵² Jahshiyārī, 231; Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa'l-Masāwī'*, ed. M. Ibrāhīm (Beirut, n.d.), 437.

civil war, al-Faḍl presided over the crucial tasks not only of defeating the caliphate of Baghdad, but also of liberating Khurāsān and bringing the Persian political elite to the helm. The text therefore fulfills Yaḥyā's latter prayer by punishing all his sons in order to complete the meritorious tribulations of the Barmakids in this life, but the text seems to imply that in another sense, Yaḥyā's first prayer excepting al-Faḍl was also answered, albeit through al-Faḍl b. Sahl.

Yaḥyā's self-flagellating tone and his admission of faultiness also make one wonder what fault he was referring to. Since the narratives of Hārūn's and Yaḥyā's families as we have seen are tied to specific moments of moral and political crisis, we may well wonder how to contextualize Yaḥyā's remarks. For this was surely not a routine formula in his prayers but a narratological reference to another phase in Barmakid history. Does Yaḥyā's anxiety revolve around an event that he saw as having shaped the fortunes of his family? The question is a crucial one because ultimately it will help us shed light on the spiritual and philosophical issues that were seen as conditioning the process of historical change. If this change is closely tied to moral problematics, as Yaḥyā claims, then there must be an answer for this riddle somewhere in the career path of his family. Yaḥyā himself may appear as thoroughly loyal to Hārūn (i.e., to the established regime), but at an earlier time he may have been not so innocent and loyal to a previous caliph, such as we find him in the reign of al-Mahdī, when as minister he played into the intrigue of al-Khayzurān, who tried to advance Hārūn for succession over al-Hādī. Evidence for this situation is not detailed, and if it did occur, it would symbolize a certain degree of disloyalty from the vizir to the caliph.⁵³ Still, Yaḥyā may not be lamenting the harvest of just that old moment as much as an even older one that related to the actions of his father, Khālīd b. Barmak. Yāḥyā's father had been instrumental in coercing 'Īsā b. Mūsā, the cousin and one-time designated heir apparent of the caliph al-Manṣūr, to renounce his claims for succession in favor of al-Manṣūr's son, al-Mahdī.⁵⁴ Indeed, one can go further and argue that Khālīd's breach of covenant built on an even more murky situation that relates to how Khālīd came to succeed the pro-'Alid propagandist Abū Salama as chief minister to the 'Abbāsīd *imāms*/caliphs.⁵⁵ If the Barmakids had at some point played a role in disenfranchising the 'Alids from their leadership rights during the revolution, then this will have great significance not only on Yaḥyā's silent frustration, but also regarding why there are so many narratives linking the Barmakid family to a variety of 'Alid rebels who were brought under 'Abbāsīd power after al-Manṣūr. The insinuation in Yaḥyā's religious discussion that the path of human judgment can cross chronological boundaries and branches down the generations cannot be separated from the dynamic according to which these narratives are ordered.

⁵³ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 102–03.

⁵⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 345–46.

⁵⁵ Bouvat, "Les Barmécides," 38.

When older Yaḥyā is shown reflecting on his early years and regretting his role or that of his family under the ‘Abbāsids. His hope that punishment may befall him entirely in this life, affecting his wealth and family, rather than touching him in the afterlife, evokes a distinct orthodox religious idea that considers earthly misfortune to be a sign of divine trial and possibly favor. This view agrees with the spirituality of gnostic religious scholars, such as al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ, who gives aphoristic statements that express similar ideas, such as when he states: “He who experiences increased melancholy should find in this a sign of God drawing close to him, while he who revels in bounty should read in this a sign of God turning his wrath against him.” Within this system of religious valuation, those who attain victory and success in this life are deemed to be the objects of temptation and of potential fall in the afterlife.⁵⁶ Yaḥyā’s philosophical ideas and attitude of resignation to earthly tribulation, it should also be said, are probably colored by Buddhism, the religion of the Barmakid household before they converted to Islam.

Despite the parallelism between the situations of Hārūn and Yaḥyā, we should not read the intended textual relation between them as a relation of identical imagery, but as one of dialogue. As fathers, elders in their families, and descendants of families long associated with religious knowledge and leadership, Hārūn and Yaḥyā share an elite social stature, but also show some marked differences. Al-Rashīd, for example, who frequently appears as a fitting royal character, dispensing great gifts or expressing appreciation for the advice of ascetics, has a different side that is depicted as conflicting with Yaḥyā’s behavior. While Yaḥyā is shown consistently as wise, pious, attending to the business of state, and addressing the grievances of the public fairly, Hārūn is often shown out hunting, engaging in idle talk in an entertaining setting, musing over wine, or playing chess. Those familiar with the sources can here not only recall illustrations of such situations, but will also recognize what an absurd proposition it would be to imagine Yaḥyā in place of al-Rashīd in any of these activities. Yaḥyā’s personality is deliberately confined within a particular frame of wise behavior to the extent that he becomes immune to any alternative turns of character. Such a change would contradict not only his style of thinking, but also undermine his determined path of historical action.⁵⁷

Exemplary in his administrative skill, always conscious of his noble rank, and thoroughly pious in behavior, Yaḥyā, the sources seem to imply, provides a model of what the caliph should have been like. Hārūn may have only had the title of wisdom, but we are shown that it was Yaḥyā whose actions spelled proper awareness of his rank and governmental responsibility. Hārūn’s discourse in the sources can be pious, even fanatical at times, but it is always

⁵⁶ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, VIII, 88.

⁵⁷ Greatly impressed with Yaḥyā’s behavior, Manṣūr reportedly stated, “*walada al-nāsu ibnan wa walada Khālidu aban*” (“People give birth to a son, but Khālid’s was a father from the start”: Ṭabarī, III, 384).

unoriginal and uninspiring.⁵⁸ Yaḥyā's statements sound like aphorisms that emanate from a deep and long process of reflection on the world. Yaḥyā does not appear perturbed by sudden turns of fortune because he understands the cycle of change. To him, the world is but a theater for powers that follow in succession according to a rhythmic cycle that turns the oppressed into holders of authority, only to turn them into oppressors of others, and then to show them the way to downfall again. As Yaḥyā put it: "The world is a cycle of stages, money is ephemeral, and we have our predecessors as proof of this, and we are, in turn, the proof of it to our successors."⁵⁹ Hārūn had once recognized this pattern of rise and fall, but seems to have forgotten it. Toward the end of his reign the caliph al-Hādī tried various means to alter the line of succession from his brother Hārūn in favor of his own son Ja'far. At the time, various commanders exhorted al-Hādī to avoid altering the received line of succession, as ordered by his father al-Mahdī, but to no avail. With Hārūn refusing to renounce his right to succession, al-Hādī put his brother in prison, and Hārūn had no doubt that soon he would be secretly assassinated. It was at this fateful hour in Hārūn's life that fortune suddenly turned in favor of the imprisoned heir to the throne. Yaḥyā was the first to announce the news of al-Hādī's death to al-Rashīd,⁶⁰ and the latter acknowledged Yaḥyā's help when he encouraged him to be patient and hold to the received covenant of al-Mahdī.

The story of al-Rashīd's imprisonment, seeming irrevocable fall from power, and sudden later release manifests considerable overlap with the Qur'ānic parable of Joseph and the way he experienced a turn in his fortunes, as a he made the sudden transition from imprisonment to a high position in court. The molding of Hārūn's situation against the backdrop of the Qur'ānic narrative can also be corroborated by the influence of further aspects of Joseph's account on other 'Abbāsīd narratives, as we shall see in

⁵⁸ *Sīyar*, XII, 109.

⁵⁹ Khaṭīb, XIV, 129 (Aṣma'ī quoting Yaḥyā). A similar view is articulated by the scholar 'Amr b. 'Ubayd when he pays one of his typical admonitory visits to the caliph al-Manṣūr. 'Amr says, "O Commander of the Faithful, God has given you the world in its entirety. Try hard to ransom yourself from him with even a portion of it, and just remember that if the power you are in today remained amongst those before you, you would never have attained a part of this authority" ("inna l-amr alladhī šara ilayka law baqiya li-man qablaka lam yašil ilayka"; Balādhurī, *Banū al-'Abbās*, 231).

⁶⁰ This was the so-called "Night of the Three Caliphs," when a caliph died, another acceded to the throne, and a third (al-Ma'mūn) was born. The fortuitous convergence of these events was read as an auspicious sign, especially as regards al-Ma'mūn whose identity was colored with this miraculous night of salvation for al-Rashīd and association with the caliphal office in general. A similar confluence of events is cited by Ṭabarī when he says that the Sasanid heir apparent Qubādh acceded to the throne, received news of the defeat of his opponent, his reigning brother Balāsh, and found out about the birth of his son Khusraw Anushirwan at the same time (Ṭabarī, III, 884). The symmetry between the two accounts was largely meant to associate al-Ma'mūn's personality with that of Khusraw. This linkage was especially embellished in light of the economic and social reforms that the rulers shared. Al-Ma'mūn was also said to have lived till the age of forty-eight, in equal measure to the reigning years of Khusraw (Ṭabarī, I, 899). On the symbolic linkages established through the number 48, see chapter 6.

the portrait of “Zubayda’s Nightmare” and “al-Amīn by the River” in the next chapter. When the new caliph, upon acceding to the throne, tells Yaḥyā, “O father, you are the one who has led me to this position (*anta ajlastanī hādha l-majlis bi-barakati ra’yika*) with your wise/blessed counsel and sound judgement, so I delegate to you now the affairs of the community (*al-ra’iyya*) and its responsibility,” we have not only a message of political loyalty involved but a paternal one as well which recapitulates a previous drama in parallel terms to Joseph’s reconciliation with Jacob on the throne, which came as a fulfillment of a dream prophecy both had discussed earlier in their lives.⁶¹

After recognizing the constraining parameters of descriptions involved in the representation of al-Rashīd and Yaḥyā, we notice that they have been made far more different than similar. Whereas Hārūn is driven by extreme passion in his acts, Yaḥyā only acts after reasoning in the light of ethical and religious principles and the interest of the state. Hārūn can be aggressive, hasty, and spiteful, but Yaḥyā is patient and forgiving. Whenever the caliph is about to exact the punishment of death in the face of disagreement or religious misunderstanding, Yaḥyā tries to avert needless bloodshed and save lives, even if the matter revolves around historical opponents of the dynasty. When Hārūn, for example, plotted to murder an ‘Alid rebel prisoner, Yaḥyā freed him,⁶² and when the caliph appeared certain to kill an Umayyad, merely because of the instinctual ‘Abbāsīd animosity to the Umayyads, Yaḥyā moved to defuse the tension, stop the witch-hunt, and reconcile the community.⁶³ On the financial level, the two are also cast in opposing lights. Hārūn seems to flaunt his wealth, often spending it wastefully; and when he bestows gifts upon religious scholars, he does so openly, and in the end his gifts are rejected.⁶⁴ In contrast, Yaḥyā, we are told, lavishes generous stipends on the ‘*ulamā*’, but he always keeps his charity secret, and news of his donations only becomes known after he falls from power, when his steady stipends to reputed scholars stop.⁶⁵ Hence al-Rashīd became guilty indirectly of harming the religious beneficiaries of Barmakid financial support.

One other point of comparison between Hārūn and Yaḥyā: both were married to women who were instrumental in hastening the tragedies in both families. In the case of Hārūn’s household, we are repeatedly told how the caliph, who was slowly moving to alter the succession plan in favor of al-Ma’mūn, found his wife obstructing his plans. Even though al-Rashīd had long demonstrated to her the lack of wisdom in her son al-Amīn and contrasted the latter’s behavior with the virtues and maturity of al-Ma’mūn,

⁶¹ Jahshiyārī, 177; *Murūj*, IV, 196. ⁶² Jahshiyārī, 189; *Murūj*, IV, 249.

⁶³ Jahshiyārī, 187.

⁶⁴ *Murūj*, IV, 214; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, IV, 48. The most prominent of these stories centers on al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād: *Siyar*, VIII, 429. On the rejection of gifts, see *Siyar*, VIII, 405, and IX, 47; Khaṭīb, IX, 416–17.

⁶⁵ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, VI, 228; *Siyar*, IX, 466; Khaṭīb, III, 19. One of the recipients of such bounty was al-Wāqidi: Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn*, 196; Khaṭīb, III, 4.

Zubayda insisted on having her son assume the position of first succession.⁶⁶ Since the first succession entailed the sensitive political task of respecting the protocols of the division of the empire, having an unreliable son such as al-Amīn succeed first invited potential problems. Al-Amīn could not be trusted to guard the rights of his secondary co-ruler, especially since al-Ma'mūn's peaceful nature and disinclination toward trouble would encourage the ruler in Baghdad to ignore the special status of the eastern provinces.⁶⁷ As mother of al-Amīn, and only wife of Hārūn, Zubayda found it inconceivable that the caliph might place al-Ma'mūn, the son of a concubine, before her son in the order of succession. Ignoring all al-Amīn's flaws she therefore pushed to secure the succession for him.

In the overall orthodox perspective on the personalities of the early 'Abbāsīd period, Zubayda holds a venerable status. The sources consistently praise her for funding the building of water stations on the pilgrim road between Iraq and Mecca, the so-called "darb Zubayda."⁶⁸ Such a pious gesture, the sources hint, exemplifies the role that a woman can have in the public sphere. Her energies must focus on pious deeds and provide comfort for Muslims – a "Mother of the Faithful," so to speak. In light of her virtuous role in 'Abbāsīd history, Zubayda, unlike Hārūn, tends to come off with limited disparagement in the texts. The chroniclers shy away from blaming her directly for the defects and downfall of her son,⁶⁹ and approve of the way she resists leading a political movement to avenge her son's death in the manner of 'Ā'isha's earlier political involvement. But the critical brushes against Zubayda are unmistakably clear, and neatly fit within the generally critical attitude that the sources hold toward female intervention in politics. Her eagerness to garner all privileges for her son grew out of her role as a mother who acted with little regard for the long-term good of the state and the community, not to mention awareness of issues relating to Islam's destiny. This situation of a mother's political scheming, the reader will recall, is not the first example in 'Abbāsīd history of a woman inadvertently fomenting political trouble. Some twenty years earlier, al-Khayzurān had also become the center of political attention when she tried to thwart al-Hādī's attempt to transfer the succession from al-Rashīd and manipulated the caliph's vizirs and commanders, exasperating the caliph to such an extent that he told her, "When did a caliph ever prosper who had a [living] mother?"⁷⁰ The difference in the present case, however, is that Zubayda's scheme, coming against the backdrop of a tense socio-political relation between Baghdad and Khurāsān,

⁶⁶ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 187.

⁶⁷ Clearly, this is a tendentious Ma'mūnid representation of events.

⁶⁸ Khaṭīb, XIV, 434; Abū al-Maḥāsīn b. Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Miṣr wa'l-Qāhira*, 16 vols. (Cairo, 1963–72), II, 228.

⁶⁹ Although the sources do not show Zubayda expressing hostile criticism of al-Amīn as they do of al-Rashīd and al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī', and tend to portray her as helpless when the conflict breaks out, she later is shown warning 'Alī b. 'Īsā not to mistreat al-Ma'mūn: Ṭabarī, III, 818.

⁷⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 570–71.

was a catalyst for *fitna*, and indirectly led to the eventual fall and death of her son.

Similarly, in the case of the Barmakid family, the mother of Ja'far is represented as a source of political trouble and the indirect reason for the murder of her son. A little-known figure in the sources, Ja'far's mother,⁷¹ also called Umm Ja'far (as was Zubayda), makes her only appearance when she inadvertently sets in motion a train of events that leads to Ja'far's fall from power. After al-Rashīd concluded the famous marriage of his sister 'Abbāsa with Ja'far, a marriage that the caliph declared was to be only nominal, Ja'far's mother reportedly grew sad that the caliph had forbidden her son to consummate the marriage. Ja'far himself, apparently, was perfectly happy being at arm's length from 'Abbāsa, but the latter's openly enthusiastic designs on Ja'far, combined with his mother's eagerness to acquire for him all the privileges of a marriage into the caliph's family, namely, offspring, put the unwitting vizir in jeopardy. During that time, Mas'ūdī tells us, Ja'far tried his best to ignore 'Abbāsa's seductive overtures, going as far as ceasing to glance at her whenever the two were in the presence of al-Rashīd. The measure seemed to work until one day Ja'far's mother came to him with a suggestion. A newly procured concubine from the Byzantine lands, she claimed, had come to her attention, and she sought to introduce this woman of high manners and beauty to Ja'far. Ja'far, unaware that his mother intended to disguise 'Abbāsa as a Byzantine concubine and smuggle her into his presence in the course of a wine party, credulously conceded to a rendezvous with the concubine. During that festive night, however, the drunken Ja'far did not recognize the princess, and the latter reveled in the masquerade and her success at his seduction, such that by the end of the night she triumphantly revealed to him her true identity, much to his horror, and declared, "*kayfa ra'ayta ḥiyal banāt l-mulūk!*" ("How do you find the guile of royal daughters?").⁷² There was no question about what al-Rashīd thought of all of this when he swiftly moved to execute his vizir, to whom he had formerly been close. In the margin of this tale, one can note how a government official fell victim to a neo-Zulaykha. Female guile, the story implies, had succeeded in driving a wedge between caliph and vizir, and in the process sowed the seeds of instability in the empire. Hārūn allegedly did not find out about this affair until 'Abbāsa had given birth to twins and was told these had been smuggled away to live peacefully in Mecca. Those seeking to extend the 'Abbāsīd drama on another level now had a third pair of actors, one that fused elements from both the 'Abbāsīd and Barmakid identity which lent itself to an even wider set of allusive implications.

⁷¹ Probably a foster mother according to Abbott: *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 63.

⁷² *Murūj*, IV, 249.

The misjudged Barmakids

Why the Barmakids fell from power is a question that has beguiled historians for centuries now, and probably remains as much a mystery today as it was a week after the Barmakids were expelled from office. Popular explanations formulated out of hearsay and impressions have offered a variety of reasons, among them that the Barmakids had grown too powerful and started to prevent the caliph from making his own decisions; that they were sympathizers of the 'Alids, even helping one of their captured leaders escape from the caliph's prison; or that it was Ja'far's affair with 'Abbāsa that did it. And the most extravagant of all was the charge that the Barmakids were secretly still adhering to their pre-Islamic faith⁷³ and plotting to overthrow the caliphate and Islam. Of all these charges against them, the accusation of heresy elicits the strongest reaction in the sources, as they loudly try to defend the faithfulness of the Barmakids to Islam. We can sense this defensiveness in the way Yaḥyā is portrayed as a model of devotion and piety. The image described earlier of Yaḥyā at the Ka'ba, deeply engaged in a direct and simple prayer, is no doubt intended to contradict the charge of heresy. Until the very last, the Barmakids continued to observe Islamic rituals, and one source highlights this commitment by saying that on cold nights in prison, al-Faḍl used to hold a cup of water close to a lit candle all night so that, when his father awoke for the dawn prayer, he would have some warm water for the ablution.⁷⁴ Apart from facilitating the performance of the religious ritual of ablution, al-Faḍl's help to his father provides an idealistic portrait of a filial loyalty that also represents an orthodox ethic.

Whatever the reason why Hārūn turned against the Barmakids, the sources leave no doubt that this decision seriously damaged the interests of the caliphate, for the Barmakids were the most efficient administrators the caliphate had seen, and their vizirate brought peace and stable government to the outlying provinces.⁷⁵ The most prominent of these cases is the province of Khurāsān, which had been a frequent source of rebellions throughout the reigns of al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī. Various 'Abbāsīd governors in Khurāsān had stubbornly insisted on bringing the province under the direct fiscal and

⁷³ Jahshiyārī, 206. We should perhaps note that this charge of Aṣma'ī against the Barmakids is not distinct from 'Abbāsa's story. For if the Barmakids are accused of heresy, then clearly Ja'far's marriage to 'Abbāsa would be considered invalid from an Islamic view. The story of 'Abbāsa, therefore, may have emerged as a corollary of the *zandaqa* charges.

⁷⁴ Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin*, 549; Maḥmūd b. al-Ḥasan b. Hamdūn, *al-Tadhkira al-Hamdūniyya*, ed. I. and B. 'Abbās (Beirut, 1996), II, 229; Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubrā*, ed. A. Basaj, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1994), II, 103. The story is recounted on the authority of al-Ma'mūn as the greatest example of the dedication of sons to their fathers. See also 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥusayn al-'Iṣāmī al-Makkī, *Ṣimt al-Nujūm al-'Awālī*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1961), III, 283. It is also said that when the guards took away the candle, al-Faḍl turned to holding the cup close to his body to warm it. Bouvat, "Les Barmécides," 99.

⁷⁵ H. Kennedy, "The Barmakid Revolution in Islamic Government," *Persian and Islamic Studies in Honor of P. W. Avery, Pembroke Papers*, I (Cambridge, 1990), ed. C. Melville, 89–98.

political control of Baghdad and had, as a result, alienated the local elite there. The situation became markedly different during al-Faql al-Barmakī's governorship between 793 and 795.⁷⁶ His lenient fiscal arrangement toward the province and his cooperative attitude toward the provincial elite made him the most popular of all governors. Meanwhile, in Baghdad, the court of the Barmakids became a center of patronage for the *'ulamā'*, poets, and scholars alike. Once the Barmakids were pushed away from the political stage, however, the point is made clearly that 'Abbāsīd administration took a dive into disarray. Khurāsān once again fell under the ruinous administration of a centralizing government, while in Baghdad the caliphate proved unable to maintain its attention to conditions in the provinces.⁷⁷

To try to disentangle legend from fact in the history of the Barmakids is an exercise that falls outside the scope of this study, and one that may well be impossible. More important perhaps when approaching the history of the Barmakid family is that the reader note how their story, as it has come down to us, encapsulates a latent current of moral tragedy that follows the contours of crisis in the history of the 'Abbāsīd polity itself. Although al-Rashīd's falling out with the Barmakids is astonishing considering the previous deep affinity between the two families, it is not the only one. The story essentially revolves around a certain pattern – one of rivalry between caliph and vizir, of courtly intrigue among the *kuttāb*, and of suspicion by the caliph of the loyalty of his Iranian subjects – which spans the lives of earlier caliphs and vizirs as well. In the reign of al-Mahdī, Abū 'Ubaydallāh Mu'āwiya b. 'Ubaydallāh b. Yasār, the caliph's chief counselor, fell victim to malicious rumors that his son, Muḥammad, was a *zindīq*. When informed of this, al-Mahdī, working within his vigorous anti-*zandaqa* policy, one day had Abū 'Ubaydallāh's son brought before his father at an assembly, and publicly questioned him about the Qur'ān, testing the son's reputation for knowing the Qur'ān by heart. When the son failed to recite properly ("*fa-ista'jama 'alayhi l-Qur'ān*"), the caliph berated the father for his son's false reputation and commanded him to carry out the sentence of execution of the son in person. Crushed by the verdict, the father, we are told, attempted to rise and obey the order, but barely had he moved a few steps forward when he collapsed, at which point a member of the caliph's entourage, al-'Abbās b. Muḥammad, advised the caliph on the immense difficulty the father faced in carrying out the sentence. Al-Mahdī then relieved Abū 'Ubaydallāh from the task, and left it for others to do.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ N. D. Nicol, "Early 'Abbasid Administration in the Central and Eastern Provinces, AH 132–218/AD 750–833," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Washington, 1979), 182.

⁷⁷ Jahshiyārī, 265.

⁷⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 490. The victim in the affair, according to Ya'qūbī, was Šāliḥ b. Abū 'Ubaydallāh: Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 400. The version in *al-'Uyun wa'l-Hadā'iq fi Akhbār al-Ḥaqā'iq*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1869), 275 agrees with Ṭabarī's. Jahshiyārī gives the name of the son as 'Abdallāh and, in a more emphatic tone than Ṭabarī and Ya'qūbī, suggests that the father was genuinely surprised by his son's religious ignorance (Jahshiyārī, 154).

In many ways the story of Abū 'Ubaydallāh foreshadows the predicament of the Barmakids. Both are accused of heresy; in both cases, the father, the vizir, is confronted with the ghastly fate of his son, while the caliph ignores the difficulty of the personal kin aspect involved in the judgment. And in both cases the instigator of the entire tragedy is another jealous bureaucrat of low origins.⁷⁹ In the case of the Barmakids, it was al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī',⁸⁰ while in the case of Abū 'Ubaydallāh, it was al-Faḍl's father, al-Rabī' b. Yūnus.⁸¹ The Barmakid story, with its prediction of a damning effect on the caliph's family, is foreshadowed in a vivid light in the way al-Mahdī orders Abū 'Ubaydallāh to carry out the sentence in a sacrificial Abrahamic style. After casting the roles of the actors in this story, its narrators could not resist diverging on details. The father's resistance to the order, while a humanitarian gesture in its own right, represented a broadside to the caliph. Whereas Abraham could trust God until the end, Abū 'Ubayd could not obey the command, because he neither trusted the wisdom of nor hoped for mercy from the caliph, and he did not believe that the charges were true. Despite the caliph's various pretensions to divine guidance, particularly significant in the case of al-Mahdī, we are here shown how the credibility of caliphal messianism among the state elite and subjects was ultimately questioned in an ironic way. And the symmetry in fates becomes complete only when Hārūn finds himself weeping for the expected fall and death of his son al-Amīn, whom he cannot but let continue on a path that has been preordained.

A different side of analogy can be established between the Barmakid story and the career of the vizir who succeeded Abū 'Ubaydallāh, Ya'qūb b. Ṭahmān. Ya'qūb, like Yaḥyā, is portrayed as a pious and wise figure whom the caliph admired. Like al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā, Ya'qūb had a distaste for wine and objected on religious grounds to the caliph's indulgence in entertainment sessions.⁸² His refusal to join in drinking bouts is reminiscent of Yaḥyā's advice to al-Rashīd that the caliph should keep the company of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā more often rather than that of Ja'far, and the caliph's comment to Yaḥyā that he is only suggesting this because al-Faḍl, unlike Ja'far, is not fond of merry parties.⁸³ Ya'qūb's other flaw, in relation to the caliph, was that he may have harbored strong sympathies with the 'Alids. Prior to joining 'Abbāsīd service, Ya'qūb had sided with Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdallāh's revolt in Baṣra, which led the caliph al-Manṣūr to imprison him. Al-Mahdī, however, later released him after recognizing the importance of Ya'qūb's old ties with the 'Alids, and sought his help in defusing 'Alid revolts.⁸⁴ The effort was

⁷⁹ Confirming the historiographical tie in these narratives between morality and class, Yaḥyā once reportedly advised his children: "You can never do without secretaries and deputies, but always search for those of high birth and avoid the lowly, for well being lasts longer with the noble, and they appreciate favors more (*ista'īnu bī'l-ashraf wa iyyākum wa safalat al-nās fa inna al-ni'mata 'alā l-ashrafī abqā wa hiya bihim aḥsan wa l-ma'rūf 'indahum ashhar wa l-shukr minhum akthar*)" (Jahshiyārī, 179).

⁸⁰ Jahshiyārī, 216, 262; Ṭabarī, III, 670.

⁸¹ Jahshiyārī, 151–54; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 275.

⁸² Jahshiyārī, 160, 194; Ṭabarī, III, 514.

⁸³ Ṭabarī, III, 676.

⁸⁴ Jahshiyārī, 155.

partly successful when Ya'qūb obtained a pardon for the Alid rebel al-Ḥasan b. 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan,⁸⁵ a situation reminiscent of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā's later success in acquiring the submission of Yaḥyā b. 'Abdallāh in Daylam.⁸⁶ Despite these positive efforts, al-Mahdī, just as al-Rashīd later did, was once again led to suspect that his vizir was secretly loyal to the Alids. To test Ya'qūb's loyalty, the caliph entrusted to him a certain 'Alid rebel and ordered Ya'qūb to imprison and gradually eliminate the 'Alid. Ya'qūb, initially inclined to the idea because of certain offers of gifts, later changed his mind when he confronted the 'Alid, who began pricking the vizir's conscience about the sacrilege involved in harming the direct descendants of the Prophet. Ya'qūb then released the 'Alid. When al-Mahdī later inquired about the prisoner, Ya'qūb told him that the matter was over and took a binding oath that he was telling the truth, but to his surprise, the caliph presented him with the 'Alid, who had somehow been rearrested after his release. Ya'qūb's false testimony under oath might be intended by the narrator to be read in conjunction with the earlier report about Mālik b. Anas's religious edict during the revolt of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya which allowed the rebels who had earlier sworn an oath of loyalty to the 'Abbāsids to break their oaths, since these pledges had been extracted under duress. Since Ya'qūb's act constituted both an act of perjury and one of political disobedience to the caliph, al-Mahdī punished him with imprisonment.⁸⁷ This charge, coupled with the political accusation by rivals that Ya'qūb had taken such control over the 'Abbāsīd administration in the east and the west that it was only a matter of time before he would give the signal to his 'Alid supporters to take over, decisively sealed the caliph's decision to make Ya'qūb's imprisonment final.⁸⁸

The story of Ya'qūb and the 'Alid is again reminiscent of al-Rashīd entrusting the 'Alid prisoner Yaḥyā b. 'Abdallāh to Ja'far b. Yaḥyā; of the latter, like Ya'qūb, being cautioned of bearing the sin of abusing the family of the Prophet; and of his subsequent decision to release the 'Alid.⁸⁹ For the rest of al-Mahdī's reign, and for al-Hādī's, Ya'qūb languished in the notorious dungeon al-Maṭbaq until he was released in the reign of al-Rashīd on the advice of Yaḥyā al-Barmakī.⁹⁰ The situations of Ya'qūb and Ja'far sometimes mirror each other even on the level of story-phrasing.⁹¹ And in the end, when given a choice of what to do in his last years, Ya'qūb, like Yaḥyā al-Barmakī,⁹² asked that he be allowed to retire to Mecca.⁹³

The accounts of the beginnings of al-Rashīd's reign optimistically describe

⁸⁵ Jahshiyārī, 156. ⁸⁶ Jahshiyārī, 189.

⁸⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 512–13; Jahshiyārī, 161; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 277–78.

⁸⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 509; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 276.

⁸⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 669–70. The account is narrated on the authority of Abū Muḥammad al-Yazīdī: *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 306. ⁹⁰ Jahshiyārī, 160. ⁹¹ Ṭabarī, III, 509, 670.

⁹² Jahshiyārī, 240.

⁹³ Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ṭabāṭabā b. al-Ṭiqṭīqa, *Kitāb al-Fakhrī* (Beirut, 1966), 187.

his accession as the dawn of a new age that was going to bring relief to various formerly disenfranchised members of the 'Abbāsīd family and of the political elite. The irony of the Barmakid career, however, is that their experience with the caliphate unfolds in a way that recapitulates, in the most painful manner, the experience of various previous non-Arab *kuttāb* associated with caliphs. The charge of secret sympathy to the 'Alids and the rumors about the extent of Barmakid control over the finances and administration of the state are simply the last such stories in the genre of dramatic representation of caliph–vizir relations. At the end of the road, the Barmakids try to correct the errors of previous caliphs, as they did regarding Ya'qūb, but in the end, they fell with no one to intercede on their behalf. The symbolic centrality of their downfall is highlighted by the fact that their fate was tied to that of Ya'qūb b. Dāwūd, who died in AH 187 in Mecca, the same year the Barmakids were dismissed from power.⁹⁴

A distant look at the collective history of the 'Abbāsīd bureaucrats and their interaction with the caliphs shows that the historical material of the 'Abbāsīds describes a morality tale played out over time between specific types of actors with consistent attributes over the years: the 'Abbāsīds, the 'Alids, the vizirs, and the non-Arab Eastern *mawālī*. The tragic flaws surrounding the relation of these actors never cease to repeat. Once in a while one hopes that a genuine shift in attitude will take place when a new caliph accedes to the throne or a vizir is dismissed. We expect that a new leaf will be turned as lessons are learned, but old biases keep plaguing the consciousness of everyone involved. One direction for this thread of irony can be pursued as follows: Khālīd b. Barmak advised al-Mahdī, when the latter was still an heir to the throne, on how to respond to al-Manṣūr's accusations against al-Mahdī's *kātib* Abū 'Ubaydallāh Mu'āwiya.⁹⁵ Abū 'Ubaydallāh was saved, and al-Mahdī was relieved, but later al-Mahdī extended similar charges to his successor's *kātib* Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarrānī, and punishment was barely averted when al-Mahdī died in Māsbadhān.⁹⁶ Al-Hādī followed with his attempt to alter the succession and to punish those who resisted, which included Yaḥyā al-Barmakī, but al-Hādī suddenly died and Yaḥyā was saved, together with al-Rashīd. No sooner than the latter developed his own arbitrary manner of political planning, however, than the Barmakids became the victims again. Still, one sees the continuation of a capable ministry in the transition to al-Faḍl b. Sahl, a protégé of the Barmakids who was introduced to al-Rashīd's circle just before they fell. At the time the caliph placed al-Faḍl in al-Ma'mūn's company as a tutor or secretary for the heir apparent. Al-Rashīd's sudden death then put an end to a tumultuous and treacherous reign, while the rise of al-Ma'mūn became a *cause célèbre* for all those who wanted to effect a fundamental change in the central administration, but in the end al-Ma'mūn himself

⁹⁴ Jahshiyārī, 162.⁹⁵ Jahshiyārī, 127.⁹⁶ Jahshiyārī, 167.

proved to be no different when he engineered the assassination of al-Faḍl b. Sahl and then denied it.⁹⁷

Throughout these turbulent years in the early 'Abbāsid period, one finds various professional offices and attributes given to the above-mentioned ministers. The chronicles may refer specifically to one as "vizir" (chief minister) or "*kātib*" (secretary) but at other times may only say that the caliph "*fawwḍa amrahu ilā . . .*" or "*wallā amrahu li . . .*" ("the caliph delegated affairs to so and so"). They may refer to a courtly official merely as *mawlā*, or describe an inexplicable leap in the honor of someone who is made "the brother in God" to the caliph.⁹⁸ But in all these situations the stories are united in showing a close association between the caliph and these chief bureaucrats, hinting at a mutual duty between the two sides and the instability of meaning in one's political, moral, and religious duties as historical developments supersede and undermine original expectations and responsibilities. Thus we face a matrix of tragic reversals: a bureaucrat of rank being undermined by a *mawlā* whom he had originally brought to court, a caliph disrupting a tutor–heir apparent relationship on the basis of rumor or unfounded doubt, and a successor-turned-caliph growing ambitious and skeptical of a minister's loyalty. Nothing seems to provide a guarantee against these errors which are summarized in full in the tragedy of the Barmakids, not even the milk brotherhood between Hārūn and the Barmakid family.

Did the caliphs ever recognize their immoral treatment of the Persian vizirs, and how they were repaying their confidants and efficient administrators with treachery? The sources assure us that al-Rashīd later recognized that the state had suffered from the Barmakid downfall, but stopped short of expressing regret. Until the very end he maintained his bitterness, punishing those who frequented the desolate neighborhood of the Barmakids ("*kharā'ib al-Barāmika*").⁹⁹ Since al-Rashīd was the architect of the Barmakid downfall, it was difficult for chroniclers to show him admitting his guilt over their having been misjudged right away. It was also awkward for the chroniclers to level criticisms against a member of the Hashemite house directly. Nevertheless the

⁹⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1027–28. Other sources placing the responsibility for the assassination on al-Ma'mūn include: Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Habīb al-Baghdādī, *Asmā' al-Muḡhtālīn min al-Ashraf*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (Cairo, 1973), 198; Abū Zakariyā al-Azdī, *Ta'rīkh al-Mawṣil*, ed. 'Alī Habība (Cairo, 1967), 343; Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Iskāfī, *Kitāb Luṭf al-Tadbīr*, ed. Ahmad 'Abd al-Bāqī (Baghdad, 1964), 164–66; Abū 'Alī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-Umam*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1871), 443 (Ibn Miskawayh includes another report that accuses 'Alī b. Abū Sa'īd of having ordered the assassins to murder al-Faḍl); al-Kāmil, VI, 347; Ibn al-Tiḡṭīqā, *al-Fakhrī*, 217.

⁹⁸ Goitein, Sourdel, Omar, and Kimber have led the way in debating these divergencies of attributes as meaningful divisions of bureaucratic function and social rank that are rooted in history. Occasionally this debate of the evidence has digressed into an inquiry into the relative influences of Arab and Persian usages of the concept of "vizirate." See S. D. Goitein, "The Origin of the Vizierate and its True Character," S. D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden, 1966), 168–96; D. Sourdel, *Le Vizirat abbasside*; F. Omar, *al-Judhūr al-Ta'rīkhiyya li'l-Wizāra al-'Abbāsiyya* (Baghdad, 1986); R. Kimber, "The Early Abbasid Vizierate," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1992), 65–85. ⁹⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 699–700.

message is later delivered indirectly through al-Ma'mūn, in a story that centers on someone who reportedly used to frequent the ruins of the Barmakids. Bayhaqī recounts how the Baghdad guards once arrested a person who was found eulogizing and lamenting the Barmakid family in their former neighborhood. When the man was brought before the caliph al-Ma'mūn, the latter immediately expressed his anger at this person whose visits to the Barmakid neighborhood defied the will of al-Rashīd. However, the man soon explained that he was driven to this deep pity for the Barmakids because they were immensely kind and generous to him during their lifetimes. To forget their good memory so quickly, the man hinted, would mean the abandoning all sense of gratitude, loyalty, and morality. This time, al-Ma'mūn, unlike his father, joined the anonymous man in lamenting the loss of the Barmakids, but expressed no criticism of his father's policy.¹⁰⁰

The 'Abbāsīd caliphs generally are reserved when it comes to judging each other's behavior. Their behavior is characterized either by chroniclers, in the course of comparing the caliph's achievements, or by opponents of the state, such as the 'Alids or rebellious members of the state elite. Ironically, one comment that perfectly sums up the intended moral permeating the stories of caliphal mistreatment of the *kuttāb* comes from the caliph al-Amīn. Al-Amīn's situation among the caliphs is unique, because his downfall makes the chroniclers exclude him from the ranks of the honorable caliphs, and place him in the circle of the downtrodden losers. Still, al-Amīn's statements in the sources occasionally provide the reader with a genuine commentary on the official account of the 'Abbāsīds. His cynical discourse sometimes betrays the hidden opinion of the narrator, such as when al-Amīn writes to Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn during the siege of Baghdad, telling him, "O Ṭāhir, mark my words! Never in the history of our dynasty has there been one who led our political cause and found his reward from us to be anything but the sword. Be on your guard!"¹⁰¹ Al-Amīn's letter to Ṭāhir does not receive much attention in the context of the siege except as an illustration of the panicked state of the caliph. Viewed against the background of rivalry between caliph and vizir, however, the letter offers an opinion that succinctly describes what all the stories about the vizirs seem to allude to.

There was constantly a gulf between the 'Abbāsīd rulers and their associates, cutting them off from their true feelings toward one another. Whether this was a result of misunderstanding or an inevitable result of political pragmatism, the story of the 'Abbāsīds was intended to show how this tragedy is as much a human-historical one as it is a political one. The Barmakid story

¹⁰⁰ Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin*, 116–19; Abū 'Alī al-Muḥassin b. 'Alī al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj ba'd al-Shidda*, ed. A. al-Shālījī, 5 vols. (Beirut, 1978), III, 166–72; 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Ibrāhīm al-Irbilī, *Khulāṣat al-Dhahab al-Masbūk, Mukhtasar min Siyar al-Mulūk* 152–54.

¹⁰¹ *Murūj*, IV, 270. The importance of recognizing the duties carried with moral performance in this story mirror al-Manṣūr's grudging acceptance of a visitor's praise for Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik: *Murūj*, IV, 134; Ṭabarī, III, 412.

stands at the center in a tragedy that weaves together the tenuous interaction between politics and morality as much as it does the tense assimilation between different generations of Muslims. Their story no doubt left a deep impression on the medieval reader/listener, who pondered the *‘ibra* (lesson) shrouding all aspects of their fate. There is *‘ibra* in the way the Barmakid career hinged on the turns of fortune, *‘ibra* in the danger of indulging one’s advantage of familiarity with those in power, and still another *‘ibra* in the way the Barmakids appear calm, sullen, and resigned at the moment of demise, unwilling to contest malicious charges or challenge the judgment of a political authority, which acted as an instrument of divine judgment. Confrontation invited sedition in unexpected ways and held the potential of jeopardizing the religious stability of the community and the value of individual spiritual salvation.

But there is tropology in the Barmakid tragedy as well. This lay in the fact that whatever position they took, they were essentially inviting disaster for one sort of action or another, the sure result, Ṭabarī might say, of engaging in political action. If the Barmakids agreed to join a caliph, such as al-Hādī, in breaking the covenant of succession, they would be acting in obedience to the caliph, but violating the morality of respecting a succession oath. If they aided the caliph in capturing the *‘Alids*, they would be acting in accordance with their political commitments to the caliphs, but violating the honor of the *‘Alid* family. And if they refrained from encouraging a Khurāsānī revolt, they would again be demonstrating their loyalty to the caliph, but also as a result would end up condoning the continuation of abusive government. There is no course of action that they could take which completely addresses the diverse political, religious, and moral considerations. Any decision was likely to open up a new ethical problematic and set in motion a new narrative that would challenge the actor’s assessment ability. And as particular as this tragic story may seem to the Barmakids, these are indeed moral predicaments that faced some of their predecessors as well. They are the legacy of the impossible synthesis between Iran’s political loyalty to the caliphate, its spiritual loyalty to the prophetic family, its commitment to the particular welfare of the Iranian lands, and its commitment to ancient Sasanid moral/political principles that were predicated on a specific social experience.

In the end, there was no point in arguing for one scenario that the Barmakids should have acted within over another or accepting one theory about the true motives of the caliph for sacking the Barmakids over another, because any sequence of motives and action was ultimately divinely preordained in a way that tested the believer’s resolve to endure earthly tragedies and to maintain steadfast trust in God. In light of this, we can see why medieval readers were less preoccupied with the question of why the Barmakids fell from power than are modern readers. The medieval reader did not read the chronicle for its factual value. Rather, he was reading through the fabric of the text in pursuit of a historical process that was predicated on a multiplicity of

received dramas. Unlike the neutral reader of today, who harbors few specific expectations of how things might or should develop, the medieval reader was primarily interested in seeing where all this was leading to – whether events in al-Amīn’s reign would truly fulfill earlier prophecies and whether the religious lesson truly exists. That the accounts of Hārūn and his sons and Yaḥyā with his sons bear a striking thematic and stylistic correlation goes to show a narrator’s skill in laying out a plot that sounded historically acceptable and religiously fulfilling from start to finish.

Hārūn al-Rashīd’s death scene

It was mentioned above that the main response the chronicles found for the Barmakid tragedy lay in the unfolding of the civil war between the ‘Abbāsīd brothers. This historical depiction rested on a particular moral conception that drew a causal relation between certain patterns of unjust behavior, in this case “*baghy*” (aggression), and certain historical developments which were read as episodes of judgment. We have already seen how Yaḥyā al-Barmakī pointed to the coming collapse of Hārūn’s household. There, Yaḥyā did not target the caliph’s person directly, but narrators extended the picture of warning to show it affecting the caliph even before he died. The account of al-Rashīd’s death provides a key moment that was used finally to apply a direct critique of the caliph. Today we might opt for a reading of the scene that separates the realistic part of the caliph’s war in Khurāsān from the dreamy and hagiographic parts in the account, but to do this would be to do injustice to the literary interconnectedness of the various literary components of the chronicle which were meant to be read in unison. To a medieval reader, the issue was not how to separate the true (historical) parts of the story from the fictional. Such a dichotomy was a non-issue because historical interpretation was crafted on a different plateau, one in which the entire account, including the hagiographic section, sounded feasible, and formed an integrated part of an interconnected worldview.

To appreciate the two levels of meaning, the critical and the descriptive, we will examine the story of al-Rashīd’s death sequentially. The basic circumstances of the caliph’s death are well known, and can be summarized as follows: In the year 809, al-Rashīd set out from Baghdad to Khurāsān at the head of an army poised to suppress the rebellion of his renegade governor in Samarqand, Rāfi‘ b. al-Layth. As the caliph entered Khurāsān, he established himself in the town of Tūs and dispatched armies to the east under the command of al-Ma’mūn and the commander Harthama b. A‘yan. However, before receiving news of the final suppression of the revolt, al-Rashīd fell seriously ill and then died. This much can be characterized as factual information about the setting and circumstances of al-Rashīd’s death.

Various sources, however, provide us with an elaborate account of al-Rashīd’s death that is rich in anecdotal detail. The embellished account starts

out ominously by saying that even before the caliph set out from Baghdad to the east on his campaign, he had fallen ill and felt the illness would be fatal. Recognizing the importance of the Khurāsānī rebellion, however, the caliph ignored his weak physical state and decided to undertake the arduous 1,000-mile trek. As he entered Khurāsān, his health took a further turn for the worse, forcing him to settle in the nearest town, Tūs, thus stopping short of continuing his march eastward. One day, as he was preoccupied with the ongoing war against Rāfi‘ b. al-Layth, the story says that the caliph recalled a dream he had while visiting the town of Raqqa in Syria some years earlier. In that dream Hārūn saw an arm stretched out toward him with a handful of red soil, and then heard a voice tell him, “Your end shall be in that land (*turba*).” When al-Rashīd asked, “where is it [i.e., the soil]?” the voice answered, “In Tūs,” and then disappeared. Al-Rashīd then awoke in horror. When his physician, Jibrīl b. Bakhṭīshū‘, conveniently called on him the next morning, he found him in a worried state. After hearing the story of the dream, the doctor tried his best to assuage the caliph’s fears by offering the explanation that the dream was probably due to the caliph’s excessive preoccupation with the frequently turbulent politics of Khurāsān and/or due to an upset stomach.

The chronicles state that after this incident in Raqqa, it was some time before al-Rashīd overcame his anxiety and forgot the incident. Now in Tūs, the caliph suddenly remembered the dream, started up in great fright, and ordered his chief servant, Masrūr, to fetch him some soil from the area while his associates tried to calm him. Complying with the order, Masrūr stepped out to the garden, fetched a handful of its soil, came back inside, and stretched out towards the caliph his hand holding the soil. Seeing this, the caliph cried out, “By God, that’s the arm I saw in my dream! That is the very hand! And it was exactly the red soil!” and then began to sob and weep. The report concludes by saying, “He died there, by God, within three days, and was buried in that very garden.”¹⁰²

On the surface, portraying the caliph as someone who might have premonitions of a future event seems flattering, especially as it strengthens the impression that the caliph had a special religious knowledge. One may even suspect that it was contrived by a narrator in ‘Abbāsīd patronage who sought to support their claims. In reality, however, this account was hardly for a purely descriptive purpose, since it was mainly intended as a commentary on al-Rashīd’s achievements, particularly his treatment of the Barmakids and his policy toward Khurāsān. The moment of death was particularly opportune for such a commentary because of the way the scene of death was viewed as a metaphor on final judgment.

What the medieval reader pondered most about this story was the structure of its symbolism and the way these accompany the caliph’s journey from Raqqa to Baghdad to Khurāsān. One crucial signal was that it was Masrūr,

¹⁰² Williams, ‘*Abbāsī Empire*, II, 297; *al-‘Uyūn wa’l-Ḥadā’iq*, 316; *al-Kāmil*, VI, 211.

who a few years earlier had followed the caliph's command and executed Ja'far al-Barmakī, who fetched the sample of the burial soil.¹⁰³ The murder of Ja'far, which had occurred in Baghdad six years earlier, had taken the Islamic community by surprise and stood as an inexplicable event. Through this story, the caliph's fate was being linked to the downfall of the Barmakids.¹⁰⁴ That the caliph met his end in Khurāsān, the homeland of the Barmakids, symbolized a vindication of the fallen vizirs.

Throughout their tenure as vizirs, the Barmakids (Yaḥyā) had always cautioned the caliph about the need for a special administrative policy in Khurāsān, whereby the province would be allowed some measure of autonomy. At the time, this advice only stirred the caliph's suspicion of Barmakid loyalty, and led him to apply an even more centralizing policy in that province. Ignoring all caution about the potential trouble of such a policy, the caliph appointed 'Alī b. 'Isā b. Māhān to govern Khurāsān. A member of the old 'Abbāsīd military guard, Ibn 'Isā despised the provincial notables, accused them of heresy, and set out exacting exorbitant taxes from the province. Seeing only the rising contribution of Khurāsān to the central treasury, the caliph failed to recognize problems in the east. On one occasion the caliph even boasted to Yaḥyā al-Barmakī about the rise of tax revenues in Khurāsān since the governorate of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā had ended. Yaḥyā's wise advice again was that provincial stability is not to be measured by financial contributions. The treasures that al-Rashīd received from Khurāsān, Yaḥyā commented, could have been easily procured from the nearby market of al-Karkh in Baghdad.¹⁰⁵ The caliph, however, chose to ignore Yaḥyā's cautious advice, and before long Khurāsān came out in rebellion under the leadership of Rāfi' b. al-Layth, the governor of Samarqand. Only when the caliph finally set out at the head of an army to Khurāsān, the story of al-Rashīd's death implies, did the caliph finally see proof of the Barmakids' cautioning words. The political skill of the caliph, an Arab king, was here subordinated to the governmental skill of his vizirs, Persian bureaucrats.

The choice of Raqqa as a setting for the dream was also carefully intended to enforce the connection with the Barmakids. In this context, we should also

¹⁰³ It is not a coincidence that Mas'ūdī, who provides the only account that says that the execution of Ja'far was carried out by Yāsir and not Masrūr, does not include the story of Hārūn's dream of death. On the other hand, all the accounts (Ṭabarī and the author of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, pp. 305 and 316) that associate Masrūr with the murder of Ja'far include the story of Hārūn's dream. This clear correlation shows that the dream story of al-Rashīd made no sense had the reader not been prepared to read the story of Ja'far's murder in its version involving Masrūr. Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī does not give the story of Ja'far's murder, but refers to Masrūr frequently in the context of the Barmakid story, and does not mention Yāsir al-khādim. At the end of al-Rashīd's reign, he also provides the story of the caliph's dream (Ibn A'tham, *al-Futūḥ*, VIII, 401).

¹⁰⁴ Also note the report that says that, when the caliph started on the Khurāsān journey and was told of the death of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī in his prison at Raqqa, Hārūn became greatly worried about his own life, because Yaḥyā al-Barmakī had often said that the fates of al-Faḍl and Hārūn were linked. (Ṭabarī III, 734). ¹⁰⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 702–03; Jahshiyyārī, 228.

recall that Raqqa was not only a favorite resting town of the caliph, but also the place where the Barmakids, Yaḥyā and al-Faḍl, were imprisoned and died. Thus the connection between the Barmakids and the ‘Abbāsids is established in their deaths as it was when they were alive. The evocative nature of al-Rashīd’s death is further confirmed by the tie between the death of al-Faḍl al-Barmakī and the caliph. Ṭabarī tells us that in his years of imprisonment, al-Faḍl al-Barmakī often used to state that the death of al-Rashīd would soon follow his own.¹⁰⁶ Hārūn dreaded this predicted tie between his death and al-Faḍl’s, and the caliph’s anxiety is manifested in a conversation about the character of Raqqa. Mas‘ūdī recounts that when on one occasion al-Rashīd asked ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Alī, his cousin and former governor of Syria, to describe Raqqa to him, and Ibn Ṣāliḥ said: “[It is the land of] the red soil (*turbatun ḥamrā*’), the yellow grain spikes, and the lush trees,” the caliph reportedly grew gloomy and upset, turned to al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī’ and said, “I could endure flogging with whips better than hearing such words.”¹⁰⁷ Hārūn’s consternation at this description may seem like a proud rejection of the Umayyad achievements in the development of Syria, but more likely it was meant to underscore his recognition of the ominous “red soil” that foreshadowed his death.

Raqqa and Ṭūs, Hārūn and Yaḥyā, the Hashemites and the Barmakids, according to the overall moral of the dream story as well as its secondary components such as the one about the debacle of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā, were like two sides of the same coin. Their fortunes were intertwined in a way that symbolized the inextricable tie between Iran, the caliphate, and Islam. The account illustrates various symbolic levels of suggestiveness, and highlights the central historical connection between justice and earthly salvation. Time is on the side of the misjudged, and while the outward historical narrative celebrates the glory of the ruler, it also subverts his moral image in an ironic way. Statements made by the caliph and vizir early in their lives can seem innocently descriptive or sound like random comments, but in reality they provide nodal points for a central thematic thrust that unfolds in a myriad of dramatic subplots that are in dialogue with one another and ultimately converge again at a point of resolution. The key message is not communicated once, but repeatedly, and in various ways, building up to the climax that concludes the saga of moralization and tragedy.

Hārūn al-Rashīd died in Ṭūs on March 24, 809 (the third of Jumādā II, AH 193).¹⁰⁸ He was buried next to the place in which the ‘Alid imām ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā would find his resting place a decade later. The actual cause of the

¹⁰⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 733.

¹⁰⁷ *Murūj*, IV, 271. Elsewhere in his work, Mas‘ūdī, we should note, provides a long account of how al-Rashīd persecuted al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī, ordering Masrūr to whip al-Faḍl al-Barmakī for failing to divulge the hiding-place of his wealth. Al-Rashīd’s reference to “enduring flogging” is connected in some form to the story of al-Faḍl’s punishment: *Murūj*, IV, 258–59; Jahshiyyārī, 244. ¹⁰⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 738; Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 303.

caliph's fatal illness was never made clear, nor why his leading physicians failed to be effective. Until the very end he suspected that his political heirs were anxiously awaiting his death, as he confided to a close advisor: "Each one of my sons has an observer over me – Masrūr being al-Ma'mūn's observer, Jibrīl b. Bakhtūshū' being al-Amīn's one, and every single one of them is counting my very breaths, numbering my days and considering my life as going on too long."¹⁰⁹ The caliph, however, seems to have taken it all in his stride, and remained set on his immediate focus in Khurāsān. With one son ready for succession in Baghdad and another ready to seize the day in Marw, the caliph still believed his succession plans would work.

And despite the order of succession, the sentiments of Hārūn as a father towards his heirs remain unclear, and whether he favored one over the other. The sources allude to this ambiguity even at the time of his final hour. In an account that bears a considerable allegorical coloring Ṭabarī tells us how the caliph in his last hour, feeling the end approaching, summoned his chief servant Masrūr, and deliberated with him the burial arrangements. As his last wish, Hārūn sought to choose his burial shroud. He therefore ordered Masrūr to go through the royal wardrobe and pick out the finest and most expensive garment and bring it to him. Masrūr says, reporting on what he did, "I could not find all these qualities in a single garment, but I did find two garments that were the most costly ones imaginable; I found that they were similar in value, except that one was slightly more expensive than the other and that one was red and the other green. I brought them both to him. He looked at them, and I explained to him about their respective value. He said, 'Use the finest one as my shroud, and put the other back in its place.'"¹¹⁰ Realistic as it may be, this story intertwines important political and social messages. Although Ṭabarī provides the story without comment, one can hypothesize that the anecdote evoked symbolisms about the central crisis about to befall the dynasty. The caliph's interest in a burial shroud here is his metaphorical way of seeking to invest a successor with the insignia of power. The two garments here were meant to symbolize Hārūn's two heirs, while the colors green and red were chosen because these were the official colors of the Sasanian dynasty, whose political and cultural legacy the 'Abbāsids inherited.¹¹¹ The caliph's desire for a shroud here becomes a marked attempt to invest one of his children with the official title of succession, but Hārūn's dilemma in being unable to arrive at a decision even on so simple a matter as choosing his burial garment, becomes only an allegory about the caliph's social dilemma of being unable to choose between his two sons. The caliph's advance knowledge of what will happen after his death only magnifies for him the danger of having to make a choice. In the end, however, the caliph realizes that only one life will succeed, and in

¹⁰⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 731; Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 293.

¹¹⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 739; Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 303.

¹¹¹ Abū 'Abdallāh Ḥamza b. al-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'rikh Sinī Mulūk al-Arḍ wa'l-Anbiyā'* (Beirut, n.d.), 26–49.

a resigned manner tells Masrūr to choose one of the garments and “put the other one away” in a subtle innuendo that shows his awareness of the fact that one of his two sons will be deprived of the privilege of associating with the caliphal office in a lasting manner. Masrūr was appropriate for the job of storing the garment because he had done to Ja‘far al-Barmakī just what Hārūn was now symbolically preordaining for al-Amīn through the disposal of the garment. The increased trend toward the Persianization of the caliphate under al-Ma’mūn made the story’s message complete, as the victorious successor fitted his Sasanian garment, while the other garment became a shroud for the caliph and a metaphor on the fate of his chosen successor.

Al-Amīn: the challenge of regicide in Islamic memory

In the accounts of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphs, al-Amīn stands out as the epitome of political incompetence and reckless behavior. A man deficient in political wisdom, most at home in extended sessions of drinking and revelry, and with a flair for unpredictable eccentricities, he personifies a type of rulership opposite to ‘Abbāsīd religious pretensions and the Persian ideal of monarchical behavior. Illustrations of al-Amīn’s curious behavior abound in the chronicles. Jahshiyārī, for example, describes how al-Amīn, after neglecting provincial affairs for a year, one day decided to study the provincial reports. As he indulged in a meal, al-Amīn, we are told, commenced listening to these reports and intermittently issued his decrees. Then when all the business of state was put in order, he ordered that all these provincial documents be placed in the center of the assembly, called for his wine goblet, settled down to drink, and then ordered someone to set the pile of official documents ablaze while he broke into laughter to the amazement of his vizir, al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ.¹ Masʿūdī corroborates this frivolity with another anecdote that describes how, at the height of the siege of Baghdad, the caliph was seen to be mostly preoccupied with finding a goldfish that had escaped from a basin in his court to a channel leading to the river, and turned the palace upside down to find it.² And Ṭabarī, too, who always seems to have something that agrees with every other chronicler, has his own stories to tell about the caliph. On one occasion, when al-Amīn learned that one of his companions had a particular distaste for

¹ Jahshiyārī, 300. This derisive image of al-Amīn was probably crafted to stand in opposition to an image from the life of al-Faḍl b. Yahyā al-Barmakī. Bayhaqī recounts that al-Faḍl b. Yahyā had a moment in Khurāsān that made him unique in the history of governors of that province. Al-Faḍl, it is said, went out one day with his friends to play polo when he suddenly ordered that all the registers of taxes in arrears be brought out to him on the field. When this was duly done, al-Faḍl then declared to the people that all these debts to the state were to be forgiven, and ordered that the registers be put to the torch. This account, which is significantly recounted on the authority of someone who is probably a Ṭāhirid personality (Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muṣʿab), underlines the diametrically opposed manners in the lives of a Barmakid and ‘Abbāsīd personalities. Al-Faḍl carries out the act in a way that contradicts his seemingly original intent to engage in a recreational event. He ends up enhancing popular sympathy for the state, while al-Amīn, seated in the setting of government, treats a serious matter as a practical joke to the detriment of the state. Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn*, 200. ² *Murūj*, IV, 268.

watermelon, Ṭabarī states, the caliph ordered that this person be forcibly fed enormous quantities of the fruit, while he broke into hysterical laughter at the man's annoyance.³

In all, these stories are meant to confirm one point, namely how al-Amīn lacked the maturity and wisdom required of rulers, and behaved in a manner that was quite unbecoming of the office of the caliphate. Whether any of these anecdotes is true is highly questionable. Both their deeply negative coloring and the unanimity among the reporters in casting this light calls for some historical skepticism. Written after his defeat in the civil war and the victory of his brother, these anecdotes comfortably detract from al-Amīn's reputation and serve to demonstrate the sharp contrast between father and son. A reader just acquainted with the majestic, resolute, and orthodox image of Hārūn al-Rashīd comes in for an immense disappointment with the person of his son. This is Islamic history's analogue to the Roman empire's contrast between Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, and the situation of political and military decline that accompanied the transfer of power.

But more significantly, the negative portrait of al-Amīn was intended to contrast with that of al-Ma'mūn. Upon comparison of the personalities of the brothers, the reader can discern a direct correspondence in their opposing traits. Al-Amīn, as mentioned above, flagrantly ignores religious guidance and is given to wine drinking and entertainment, while al-Ma'mūn is wise, pious, and austere. Al-Amīn has impaired proper government and upset the hierarchy of state by consulting women and slaves, while al-Ma'mūn has turned for support to the notables of Khurāsān and the traditional political elite of Transoxiana during the war. Al-Amīn is treacherous, as in his violation of the covenant of succession, al-Ma'mūn is respectful and faithful toward the memory of his father. From this polarization in imagery, one could see that not only did al-Amīn lack the credibility to rule, but that al-Ma'mūn, although only second in succession, manifested qualities that made him an ideal candidate for the caliphate right away. The only question was: how to remove al-Amīn from his position of power, and bring al-Ma'mūn to the helm.

The conclusion of the civil war, with al-Ma'mūn's armies storming the besieged city of Baghdad and putting the caliph to death, in essence answered this question from a practical point of view. In historical terms, however, the violent downfall of the caliph tarnished the prestige of the 'Abbāsīd caliphal office, and raised doubts about the political legitimacy of the new caliph. The murder of al-Amīn, the first violent death of an 'Abbāsīd caliph since the founding of the dynasty, unraveled much of the effort of his predecessors towards secure monarchical rule. Although merely half a century old when the civil war broke out, the 'Abbāsīd monarchical institution had already cemented its credibility in the public mind. A series of short-lived but capable rulers had succeeded in blending together different conceptions of Arab and Iranian rul-

³ Ṭabarī, III, 969.

ership, thereby fusing diverse types of cultural and regional political loyalties. And even more powerful had been the fact that the rise of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate was viewed as an eschatological event that brought about the dawn of a messianic order destined to rule Islamic society for eons, or at least until the second coming of Jesus.⁴ All these factors combined to inspire a sense of public confidence in the regularity and stability of the new dynasty; a confidence that came to an end on 26 Muḥarram AH 198 (September 26, 813) when the community woke up to find the caliph's head on display at the gate of Baghdad.

For observers writing about these events at the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth centuries, after the 'Abbāsīd caliphate had been carved up into provincial successor states, the fall of Baghdad put them face to face with some difficult religio-historical questions such as: How could they explain the failure in 'Abbāsīd leadership under al-Amīn, and how could it be that the founding generation of the dynasty, the Abnā', viewed as the descendants of the Perso-Arab generation credited with the righteous achievement of overthrowing the Umayyads, could themselves be overthrown by a new eastern power and in the context of civil war? In order to address these considerations, medieval chroniclers found it necessary to elaborate a historiographical scheme that explains the collapse of al-Amīn's regime. For some, this was a clear-cut result of al-Amīn's alleged treachery, recklessness, ineptness, or even a predestined fate.⁵ But for others, the issues involved were not so one-dimensional, and by analyzing the complex profile of al-Amīn in this chapter, we shall examine how narrators contrived a more controversial blueprint for the history of the civil war, one that was subtly critical of al-Ma'mūn.

The cornerstone of the Ma'mūnid apologetics: the anti-Amīn current

The most obvious level on which some sources sought to explain the downfall of al-Amīn was in religious terms. Just as the earlier fall of the Umayyad dynasty was seen as the inevitable fate of rulers who ruled as monarchs, and not as caliphs, authoritarian and preoccupied with squandering wealth, a similar exercise was now to be applied to al-Amīn. But because al-Amīn belonged to the chosen and sacred 'Abbāsīd house, a rich hagiographic tradition was to develop that sought to explain how his flaws were the exception to the 'Abbāsīd norm.

The construction of a hagiographic web of anecdotes predicting downfall around the person of al-Amīn was one of the major historiographic tools used to explain his murder. The medieval historian Mas'ūdī epitomizes this method when he provides a wide array of such hagiographic accounts. In the lengthiest of such anecdotes, he recounts how Zubayda, al-Amīn's mother and sole

⁴ Khaṭīb, XIV, 435.

⁵ For an example of the perspective that casts the conflict as predestined fate see the anecdote "Hārūn's Premonition of the Civil War," p. 32 above.

wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd, once experienced apparitions in her dreams predicting ill-fortune for al-Amīn.⁶ Mas‘ūdī states:

Some chroniclers and historians of the ‘Abbāsids, such as Madā’inī and ‘Utbī and others, relate that Zubayda, on the very night in which she conceived Amīn, dreamed that three women came into her room and sat down, two on her right and third on her left. One of them drew near and placing her hand on the belly of Zubayda said the following words:

“A magnificent king, open-handed in his generosity, his yoke will be heavy, his life misfortune.”

The second having imitated the gesture of the first, spoke this:

“A weak-willed king, blunt-edged, insincere in friendship; he will rule as despot and by fortune be betrayed.”

The third, doing as those who came before had done, said:

“A sensual king, wasteful of blood, surrounded by revolt and sparing of justice.”

Zubayda went on with the story:

“I awoke prey to the deepest horror. On the night in which I gave birth to Amīn, they appeared again in my sleep just as I had seen them the first time. They sat at my bedside and stared fixedly at me. The first then said:

“A verdant tree, a fair flower, a lovely garden.”

The second went on:

“A copious spring, but swift to run dry and swiftly gone.”

And the third:

“Enemy of himself, weak in power and fast in rage – he will lose his throne.”

I woke with a start, seized with fear. One of the women in charge of my household to whom I told this dream, persuaded me that it was no more than an odd chance of sleep, a game played by the female demons who attend women in childbirth.

One night when my son was weaned, I had placed the cradle in which my child slept beside me and was getting into bed, when the three women appeared once more and headed towards the cradle. The first said:

“A tyrant, a wastrel, a babbling fool, his way lost, his desires baffled, riding for a fall.”

The second added:

“A contested speaker (*nāṭiqun makḥṣūm*), a vanquished warrior (*muḥāribun mahzūm*), a seeker denied (*rāghibun mahrūm*), and an anxious unfortunate person (*sha-qiyyun mahmūm*).”

The third ended:

“Dig his grave, open his coffin, bring out his winding sheet, prepare the procession. His death is better than his life.”

I awoke profoundly troubled and deeply disturbed at the fate of my son. In vain the astrologers and interpreters of dreams whom I consulted assured me that he would live out long years of happiness; my heart would not believe their promises. But at last I began to reproach myself for my weakness and I said to myself:

‘Can love, care, and forethought cheat destiny? Can anyone drive fate back from the one they love?’ (*hal yadfa’ l-ishfāq wa’l-ḥadhar wāqi’ l-qadar . . .*).

⁶ *Murūj*, IV, 262; P. Lunde and C. Stone (trans.) *Meadows of Gold* (London, 1989), 133. A similar pattern to this story, but with different wording for the prophecies (and sometimes with different rhyme schemes) is given in Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Tiwal*, 383.

Zubayda's dream stylistically summarizes both the ominous dream of Hārūn at Raqqa and his premonitions of a disaster that will befall his children, as we saw him confide to Kisā'ī in the episode we called "Hārūn's Premonition of Civil War." The hagiographic tenor of Zubayda's story, which we shall call "Zubayda's Nightmare," is clear enough, but in order to examine the context in which the story developed, we must investigate both the literary framework of the story and its connection with other accounts prophesying al-Amīn's fall. Beyond the overt prediction of downfall, "Zubayda's Nightmare" manifests a subtle level of ominous communication. When one of the women on the third occasion describes al-Amīn by saying, "A contested speaker (*nāṭiqun makhṣūm*) and a vanquished warrior (*muḥārribun mahzūm*) and a seeker denied (*rāghibun mahrūm*) and an anxious unfortunate person (*shaqiyyun mahmūm*)," we must note the particular choice of the words. The word *nāṭiq*, for example, is specifically intended to evoke memory of the title of al-Amīn's contested heir apparent, his infant son al-Nāṭiq bi'l-Ḥaqq, while the statements *rāghibun mahrūm* and *shaqiyyun mahmūm* throw the reader's attention back to the reign of al-Rashīd, and one of Ṭabarī's stories about that caliph's prayers at the Ka'ba, when al-Rashīd, deep in his supplication, concluded his prayer by saying, "O God, let us live happy and die martyrs, and render us happy in Your Sustenance, not wretched ones deprived (*wa lā taj'alnā ashqiyā' mahrūmīn*)."⁷ Hārūn's statement was here constructed in a manner that conflated various phrasings of the prophesying women in the story of Zubayda's dream.

The literary inspiration for "Zubayda's Nightmare" can further be appreciated when we consider the analogy between the ominous theme of the story and its three-tiered progression in prediction to that evident in another anecdote which is set according to the chronicles in the final days of al-Amīn. This anecdote, which survives in almost identical versions in the works of Ṭabarī, Mas'ūdī, and others, describes a visit that Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī made to al-Amīn during the siege of Baghdad. Ibrāhīm, who recounts the story, describes an entertainment session which the caliph called for that night as follows:

Muḥammad [i.e., al-Amīn] went out one night, wanting to relieve the dejection he was feeling. He went to al-Qarār Palace, at Sarāt Point, below al-Khuld Palace, late at night. He sent for me, and I went to him. He said, "Ibrāhīm, don't you see the pleasantness of this night and the beauty of the moon in the sky with its light in the water?" (We were on the bank of the Tigris at the time.) "Would you like to drink?" "As you will," I said, "may God make me your ransom!" So he called for a flagon (*raṭl*) of date wine (*nabīdh*). He drank it and then gave orders, and I was given a similar one to drink. I began to sing to him without his asking me, for I knew in what bad humor he was. I sang something that I knew he liked. "How would you like someone to accompany you?" he said. "How I would like that!" I said. So he called for a favorite slave girl of

⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 752. See above. Al-Rashīd's statement encompasses both an unflattering hint at al-Amīn (*ashqiyā'*) and a dissenting voice of sympathy in his hope for martyrdom. The latter has to be understood in the context of the undercurrent of sympathy in the sources for al-Amīn after the regicide (see the analysis of the regicide narrative on pp. 77–84 below).

his named Da'f. Given that we were in such a state of affairs, I found her name ominous. When she came before him, he said, "Sing," so she sang from the poetry of al-Nābigha al-Ja'dī:

Kulayb, by my life, was a better defender
and less guilty than you, yet he became stained with [his own] blood.⁸

What she sang distressed him and was ominous to him. He said to her, "Sing something else," so she sang:

Their departure has made my eye tearful and sleepless:
verily, parting from loved ones provokes many tears.
The vicissitudes of their fortune continued to oppress them, until they
destroyed each other: verily the vicissitudes of fortune are oppressive!

He said to her, "May God curse you! Don't you know anything else to sing?" She replied, "Master, I only sang what I thought you liked. I didn't mean to do anything you disliked. It was only something that came to me." Then she started another song:

By the Lord of repose and movement,
fate possesses many snares.
Night and day succeed each other,
and the stars revolve in the firmament,
Only to transfer prosperity from one king
occupied with the love of this world to another.
But the kingdom of the Possessor of the [Heavenly] Throne
endures forever:
it neither passes away nor is shared with a partner.

"Get up," he said, "and may God be wrathful with you!" So she stood up. Now he had a beautifully made crystal cup that had been placed before him. As the slave girl got up to leave, she tripped over the cup and broke it. [Continuing.] Ibrāhīm said: The strange thing is that whenever we sat with this slave girl, we experienced something unpleasant in our assembly. [Muḥammad] said to me, "Alas, Ibrāhīm, don't you see what this slave girl has mentioned and what happened with the cup? By God, I think my time has come." "God," I said, "will lengthen your life, strengthen and preserve your kingdom for you, and subdue your enemy." Before I had finished my words, we heard a voice from the Tigris, saying: "Decided is the matter whereon you two enquire." "Ibrāhīm," he said, "didn't you hear what I just heard?" "No, by God I heard nothing," I said, although I had indeed heard. "You will hear a soft sound," he said. So I went down to the river bank, but I saw nothing. We resumed the conversation and the voice returned: "Decided is the matter whereon you two enquire."⁹ He jumped up in distress from

⁸ In another version of this story, told by al-ʿAbbās b. Aḥmad b. Abbān al-kātib on the authority of Ibrāhīm b. al-Jarrāh who quotes Kawthar al-khādim, the servant says this verse on the second occasion after al-ʿAmīn's rebuke. On the first occasion of singing, however, the concubine sings:

They killed him that they might take his place,
as once Kisrā was betrayed by his *marzubāns*.

(Ṭabarī, III, 957; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 231.) This verse, as Muḥammad Abū'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm points out, was originally said by al-Walīd b. ʿUqba addressing the Banū Hāshim after the murder of ʿUthmān: *al-Kāmil*, III, 28. ⁹ *Qurʾān*, 12:41.

where he was sitting, mounted, and returned to his place in the city. It was only one or two nights later that the events of his death occurred – it was on Sunday, the 6th or 4th day of Ṣafar in the year 198.¹⁰

This anecdote, which I will call “al-Amīn by the River,” like “Zubayda’s Nightmare” was intended to show the inevitable approach of al-Amīn’s fate. The verse describing the transient nature of material power in terms analogous to the alternation between night and day and the movement of the stars shows a historical logic and a conception of change that was tied to astronomical knowledge. Human fate and fortune are here connected with heavenly movements (hence the careful positioning of the moon in the anecdote), and the rhythm of creation together with its governing law of time are placed in a subordinate position to the will of God.

The narrator deliberately had the singer utter these “prophesying” words partly to indicate the mechanism of this universal path of change whose movement can be partly discerned in the ordinary speech of unwitting actors. When the caliph scoldingly asks the singer why she chose an ominous song, she explains to him that the words just ran off her tongue, although her true feelings toward the caliph were different. We find this situation mirrored in the scene of al-Manṣūr’s final days, when a narrator tells us that, as the caliph asked a man in his company to recite the Qur’ān, the reciter read ominous verses that predicted the caliph’s death. When al-Manṣūr chided the reciter for choosing to read verses that sounded hostile, the man said, “Commander of the Faithful, God erased everything in the Qur’ān but that from my heart!”¹¹ The connection in mood and style between the anecdotes about the two caliphs shows common threads of representation that crossed the boundaries of different caliphal reigns.¹²

Focusing on the scene of “al-Amin by the River,” we find that the prophetic voice coming from the Tigris confirms the predictions of Zubayda’s visitors. The three-stage progression in the last account is similar to the one we find in Zubayda’s story. Both anecdotes in fact seem to have been initiated by the same narrator or at least narrators who were cooperating in the composition process. The clue to this lies in the statement that is quoted as the voice coming from the Tigris. This statement is drawn from a Qur’ānic verse in the chapter that describes the life of the Joseph. In the context of the Qur’ānic account, the verse represents the statement with which Joseph concluded the dream interpretation he gave to two prisoners who came to him to interpret dreams that they had experienced. The particular choice of this verse by the narrator

¹⁰ Tabarī, III, 909–11; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 179–81. There are similar reports in Ibn A‘tham, *al-Futūḥ*, VIII, 410–12; *Murūj*, IV, 266–67; *al-‘Uyūn wa’l-Ḥadā’iq*, 336–37; al-Azdī, *Tā’rīkh al-Mawṣil*, 329–30; ‘Alī b. Anjab Ibn al-Sā’ī al-Baghdādī, *Mukhtaṣar Akhbār al-Khulafā’* (Cairo, 1891), 37. ¹¹ Tabarī, III, 449; Williams, *‘Abbāsī Empire*, II, 50.

¹² See also a comparable story relating to al-Ma’mūn (chapter 4).

may reflect the train of thought of the composer of the first hagiographic account, which, as we saw, was entirely about dreams and Zubayda's great anxiety over failing to interpret them. The choice of this Qur'ānic verse suggests one more thing: that the certainty of al-Amīn's downfall was a predestined answer to al-Rashīd's mistreatment of Yaḥyā al-Barmakī. As we saw above, when Yaḥyā pleaded with the caliph to punish only the suspected Barmakid wrongdoer, and to pardon other members of the family, the caliph's only response was to quote the Qur'ānic verse, "Decided is the matter on which you enquire." Al-Amīn hearing this Qur'ānic verse on the Tigris symbolized an echo from the past that lingered on until the Barmakid story was now complete with the civil war.

The oppositional current: the historiographic voice of sympathy for al-Amīn

Viewing and justifying the war of succession as al-Amīn's responsibility or as predestined fate was, however, a position that had its limitations. It was insufficient for some medieval observers and chroniclers simply to explain the victory/defeat as a function of the virtuous image of al-Ma'mūn and the vile nature of al-Amīn or through prophetic anecdotes. They were equally interested in interpreting, albeit indirectly, events on the ground. For these medieval observers, notably Ṭabarī, conflict within the community (*fitna*) was not a purely political phenomenon but a religious one as well, one which, while having a place in a transcendental plan, depends to a great extent on the active participation of individuals in events and their reaction to things.¹³ They subtly shed skepticism about the purity of arms of Ṭāhir and the responsibility of al-Ma'mūn, raising not only new questions, but leading us to make important distinctions among issues. For example, whether al-Amīn was truly responsible for provoking the war is a totally different question from whether the war had willy-nilly to be brought to conclusion through the humiliation of the caliphal office and person. The muffled disagreement on whether the murder was ultimately justified surfaces in the division among the sources on the identity of the party that ordered the murder.

While the narrative leading up to the downfall of al-Amīn is reported in almost identical terms, we find that the accounts differ in describing how the event was received at al-Ma'mūn's camp in Marw. The question of whether the decision to execute was taken on the field at Ṭāhir's command or secretly ordered by al-Ma'mūn forms the crux of a muted controversy in the sources. Consider the following divergences among the sources in reporting various reactions to the news of conquest.

1) The chronicler Ya'qūbī entirely avoids mentioning the reaction of either al-Ma'mūn or al-Faḍl b. Sahl at court in Marw.

¹³ M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1974), I, 356.

2) Jahshiyārī, on the other hand, says in his *al-Wuzarā' wa'l-Kuttāb* that when the head of al-Amīn arrived in Marw, al-Faḍl reflected in amazement, "What has Ṭāhir brought on us? He shall now unleash on us the tongues and swords of people. We ordered him to send him [al-Amīn] prisoner, and he sends his head."¹⁴

3) Ṭabarī, agreeing with Jahshiyārī, adds that al-Faḍl b. Sahl wept when he made his reflective comment and that al-Ma'mūn casually told him, "What has passed is now past; now find the means to exonerate him [i.e., Ṭāhir]." In this context, Ṭabarī continues, saying, "so people [i.e., scribes] wrote [sample letters of apology]. But these were lengthy. Then came forward Aḥmad b. Yūsuf [with his letter]."¹⁵

4) The anonymous author of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq* offers various reports. In the first he mentions that al-Ma'mūn bestowed 1 million dirhams on Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muṣ'ab (Ṭāhir's cousin), the messenger who brought the head of al-Amīn together with *al-khātim* (the ring), *al-qaḍīb* (the staff), and *al-burda* (the mantle), together the insignia of the caliphate. He then goes on to say, "and then Dhū'l-Riyāsatayn [al-Faḍl] entered and found the head of al-Amīn positioned on a shield in front of al-Ma'mūn. It is said that when he saw it, he prostrated himself (*sajad*)."¹⁶

In the next, the anonymous chronicler agrees with a report of Ṭabarī that shows al-Faḍl weeping and making his reflective comment and describes al-Ma'mūn's cold attitude toward the event and his ordering al-Faḍl to find the means for apology. But he stops short of the story of Aḥmad b. Yūsuf and does not include the text of the letter, itself a subject of controversy. The anonymous chronicler, however, adds that it is also said that when al-Ma'mūn saw the head of his brother, he wept, asked God to forgive him (al-Amīn), and reminisced about the favors that al-Amīn had once done for him, and the good times they had spent together in al-Rashīd's time.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jahshiyārī, 304.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 949–50; Ibn 'Atham, *al-Futūḥ*, VIII, 415; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 418.

¹⁶ *Al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 341; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 415; Ṭabarī, III, 925; *al-Kamīl*, VI, 287; Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-Islām*, XII, 62. Ṭabarī, Ibn Miskawayh, Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn al-Jawzī, and Dhahabī's versions of this make al-Faḍl the one who presents al-Amīn's head on a shield to al-Ma'mūn, and the latter the one who prostrated himself. Ibn al-Jawzī differs from the other chroniclers when he states that al-Ma'mūn ordered the monetary gift, set at 1 million dinars, for Ṭāhir himself (see Abū'l Faraj 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Alī b. al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fī Ta'rikh al-Mulūk wa'l-Umam*, ed. M. A. 'Atā, 18 vols. in 16 Beirut, 1992, X, 48). There are also conflicting accounts in the narratives of what constituted the caliphal insignia. While more often they are mentioned as: *al-burda*, *al-qaḍīb*, and *al-muṣallā* (prayer carpet), Ṭāhir, in his letter announcing victory to al-Ma'mūn, mentions negotiation over the sword of the Prophet as well. Ṭabarī, III, 927.

¹⁷ *Al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 341. The author of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq* does not elaborate on al-Ma'mūn's favorable memories of al-Amīn, but in later times such seeds of positive commentary become expanded into narratives designed to show innate human virtue, prior to political influences. Thus the twelfth-century chronicler Ibn al-'Imrānī illustrates this point in a rare report that portrays al-Amīn favorably. Ibn al-'Imrānī states that after the head of al-Amīn arrived in Marw, al-Ma'mūn wept, and when asked by al-Faḍl about the reason for his distress, al-Ma'mūn said: "Despite al-Amīn's treachery (*ma' 'uqūqihī*) and his lack of goodwill, I

5) Mas'ūdī, on the other hand, narrates that when the head of al-Amīn was brought to Marw, it was al-Ma'mūn who wept and felt great sorrow over his death. Al-Faḍl b. Sahl said, according to Mas'ūdī, "Commander of the Faithful, praise be to God for this great reward (*al-ni'ma al-jalīla*), for al-Amīn had wished to see you in the position that God has afforded you of him today." Mas'ūdī's report continues, "al-Ma'mūn then ordered that the head be placed in the central courtyard (*ṣaḥn al-dār*) on a wooden stand. He then distributed sums of money among the military and ordered whoever had earned his reward to proceed and curse the head. One of those in his turn, said, 'May God's curse be upon this, and his parents, and upon all those to whom they had given birth.' It was said to him, 'You have just cursed the Commander of the Faithful,' but al-Ma'mūn smiled and pretended not to have heard him. He then ordered the head be sent back to Iraq for burial."¹⁸

Outside this immediate context, Mas'ūdī reports that when at a later point al-Ma'mūn received word about a poem in which al-Amīn's mother eulogized her son's death, al-Ma'mūn wept and said, "By God, I can only say what the Commander of the Faithful 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said when he received word of 'Uthmān's murder, 'By God, I did not kill or order, or sanction the murder.' May God bring agony to Ṭāhir's heart."¹⁹

6) Al-Zubayr b. Bakkār also provides a version that places the responsibility on Ibn Sahl. Ibn Bakkār states: "I am told by al-Zubayr who says on the authority of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Tamīmī, who says that he was told by 'Alī b. Abī Sa'īd, 'when the 'deposed one' [i.e., al-Amīn] was killed, his head was brought to al-Ma'mūn seventeen days after the announcement [of victory]. I

footnote 17 (*cont.*)

remembered an occasion when al-Rashīd once commanded that I be given 100,000 dinars and al-Amīn 200,000 dinars. I happened to learn of this gift before my brother did, so when I came to him and informed him of the rewards he said to me, 'My brother, if you feel some discomfort about my more favorable share of the gift, then there, I give it all to you in appreciation for your bringing me this good news.' So," al-Ma'mūn concludes, "I received the 300,000 dinars myself" (Muhammad b. 'Alī b. al-Imrānī, *al-Inbā' fī Tarīkh al-Khulafā'*, ed. Q. al-Sāmrrā'ī [Leiden, 1973], 95). Ibn al-Imrānī's story clashes with the traditional portrayal of the brothers (see Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 188).

¹⁸ *Murūj*, IV, 296. Al-Ma'mūn's behavior here contrasts with that of al-Manṣūr in a similar context. When al-Manṣūr was brought the head of the rebel Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdallāh al-Ḥasanī "on a shield," the caliph ordered that it be placed before him. As the caliph looked on, Ṭabarī reports, one of the guards (a member of the Rawandiyya according to Ibn Ḥamdūn) came forth and spat on it. The narrator here says, "Abū Ja'far gave him a hard look, and then told me 'Break his nose!' [i.e., the guard's]. I dealt his nose such a blow with my mace that if anyone had sought for it he could not have found a nose for a thousand dirhams. Then the maces of the Guard went to work on him, and he was smashed by them until he was still, and was dragged out by the leg" (Ṭabarī, III, 417; Williams, *Abbāsī Empire*, II, 22–23). Ibn Ḥamdūn's version adds that the caliph addressed him saying, "You son of a stinking prostitute. Dare you approach the head of my cousin, as he became in a condition where he cannot defend himself, and then strike him . . . May God's curse and punishment befall you!" (Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, I, 430). These accounts no doubt had to be read in dialogue with the description of al-Ma'mūn's passive attitude toward the similar attack on his kinsman. The ambiguity that surrounds al-Ma'mūn's true feelings does not exist with al-Manṣūr, who draws boundaries between his conflict with the pretenders and the role of his subordinates in the intra-Hashemite conflict. ¹⁹ *Murūj*, IV, 298.

was with [al-Faḍl] when he entered [with the sealed wrapping of al-Amīn's head] into the presence of al-Ma'mūn, and then [al-Faḍl] told me, 'unseal it (*al-khātīm*),' which I did until I finally got to a velvet cover. When I further unfolded this, the head, which was covered with cotton, became visible. Al-Ma'mūn looked at it, as if in a glimpse from the side of his eyes, then grimaced and turned his face away from the scene. Dhū'l-Riyāsātayn then said, 'O Commander of the Faithful, this is a time for gratefulness, therefore, thank God who has shown him [i.e., al-Amīn] to you in the position that he had hoped you will be in.' He then ordered me to fully unveil the head, and looked at it at length, and subsequently ordered that it be placed on a pole for public display. He then designated a reward for people who came forth to curse 'the deposed one' [until the man who indirectly cursed al-Ma'mūn]. Finally, al-Ma'mūn ordered the cursing to cease."²⁰

7) Maqdisī, however, probably comes closest to an unequivocal blaming of al-Ma'mūn. He provides the unusual report which says that Ṭāhir had written to al-Ma'mūn asking for orders regarding al-Amīn, upon which al-Ma'mūn sent him a shirt that had no opening for the head (*ghayr muqawwar*), from which Ṭāhir understood that the message was an order to murder al-Amīn.²¹

8) The early source Ibn Ḥabīb al-Baghdādī perhaps would find the elaborate descriptions given by others too evasive. In his compendium of prominent assassins and those assassinated, he bluntly states, "'Abdallāh al-Ma'mūn: he killed Muḥammad al-Amīn and seized his dominion."²²

As time went on, the details of the political conflict leading up to the civil war became less important for chroniclers who no doubt could make little sense of the order of the dispute between the brothers. What did remain significant, however, was the episode of al-Amīn's fall, and many continued to devote considerable space to giving their assessment of the issue of responsibility. On the whole, chroniclers in the later medieval period tried to cast a reconciliatory view of the brothers, and did their best to place the burden of blame for the murder on Ṭāhir. This is a view that comes across in the twelfth-century chronicle of the pro-Hashemite Ibn al-ʿImrānī and in the fourteenth-century work of Ibn al-Ḥarīrī.²³

The issue of al-Amīn no doubt continued to resonate with important implications for various later dynasties, which sought to clarify the separation between the ruler and his associates. Writing under the glaring watch of Mamluk authority, Ibn Taghrībirdī would comment on the ʿAbbāsīd events by saying, "It was not the intention of al-Ma'mūn to murder his brother. Ṭāhir intruded on al-Amīn, and killed him without the permission of al-Ma'mūn. It is for this that al-Ma'mūn held a grudge against him [i.e., Ṭāhir], but he could

²⁰ *Muwaffāqiyyāt*, 140.

²¹ Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *al-Badʿ wa'l-Taʾrīkh*, 6 vols. (Beirut, n.d.), VI, 110; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, II, 518. ²² Ibn Ḥabīb, *Asmāʾ al-Mughṭālīn*, 206.

²³ Aḥmad ʿAlī b. al-Maghribī b. al-Ḥarīrī, *Kitāb Muntakhab al-Zamān fī Taʾrīkh al-Khulafāʾ wa'l-Aʿyān*, ed. A. Khalifa (Beirut, 1993), 146–47; Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʾ*, 95.

not but hide his bitterness.”²⁴ When describing the achievements of Ṭāhir, Ibn Taghrībirdī reiterates the assertion that al-Ma’mūn could not overtly object to Ṭāhir’s policies. As he put it, “*wa kāna fī nafsi l-Ma’mūn minhu shay’un li-kawnihi qatala akhāhu l-Amīn bi-ghayri mashwaratihi lamma zafara bihi ... fa-lammā qatalahu lam yasa’ l-Ma’mūn illā al-sukūt li-kawni Ṭāhir huwa l-qā’im bi-dawlati l-Ma’mūn wa bi-nuṣratihi ‘alā akhīhi l-Amīn, ḥattā tamma lahu dhalika.*”²⁵ And, following the skeptical view of Ibn Taghrībirdī, Suyūṭī would also reiterate that al-Ma’mūn was disappointed with the news of al-Amīn’s death. As he put it: “Al-Ma’mūn was greatly distressed at the news of his brother’s killing, for he had hoped (*kāna yuḥibbu*) that al-Amīn’s life would be spared, and [that al-Amīn] would be sent to him so that he could decide in his matter. It is for this [i.e., the murder] that he [al-Ma’mūn] held a grudge against and neglected Ṭāhir by creating a distance from him until [Ṭāhir] died far away.”²⁶

The above excerpts display the range of views describing al-Ma’mūn’s and al-Faḍl’s reactions to the murder. The divergence among these accounts reflects a basic division among observers on how to assign responsibility for the events of the civil war. No single report among the above shows that there was a coherent plan known to all three – al-Ma’mūn, al-Faḍl, and Ṭāhir – for dealing with the captured caliph. Each description seems to exonerate one of the three while implicating the others. The challenge presented by the problem of regicide was never resolved. Once it surfaced in the early medieval sources, it continued to pose a difficulty for later chroniclers who were also divided on how to understand the statements of the early accounts.²⁷

The controversial letter of apology

The difficulty of accommodating the regicide also surfaces in the way the sources diverge on reporting the purpose and content of an official document that was written in al-Ma’mūn’s camp after the war, and addressed to the people of Baghdad to justify the murder of al-Amīn. This document exists in two versions, one of which is provided by Ya’qūbī. Ya’qūbī reports that immediately following the war, Ṭāhir wrote in his own hand to al-Ma’mūn a statement that declared:

In spite of the fact that the deposed one (*al-makhḷū’*) [i.e., al-Amīn] is a partner to the Commander of the Faithful in genealogy and kin, the judgment of the Book has sep-

²⁴ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm*, II, 214.

²⁵ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm*, II, 183.

²⁶ Abū al-Faḍl ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Suyūṭī, *Ta’rīkh al-Khulafā’*, ed. M. M. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo, 1964), 300.

²⁷ Gabrieli places the main blame on Ṭāhir, and argues that Ṭāhir’s letter of apology would not have been necessary if al-Ma’mūn had ordered the murder. In dealing with the other accounts, however, he does not accept the representation of al-Faḍl as surprised by the event (Gabrieli, “Successione,” 393). D. Sourdel accepts al-Faḍl’s expression of astonishment (*Le Vizirat ‘abbaside*, II, 206), while H. Kennedy avoids placing blame on a single party in al-Ma’mūn’s camp (Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 148).

arated between them in matters of state (*fi'l-wilāya*) and sanctity (*al-hurma*), for he [i.e., al-Amīn] has abandoned the knot of religion (*ʿismat al-dīn*) and strayed from what Muslims have agreed on. God the almighty says, “O Nūḥ [Noah], he [i.e., Noah’s son] is not of your family [any longer]. It is not a righteous path [that he followed].” And there is no obedience to anyone when in disobedience to God, and, if people shall part, it must be in matters relating to God.²⁸ [I dispatch here] my present letter to the Commander of the Faithful, when God has brought death to the deposed one, and surrendered him [to us], for his treachery. He has settled his problem for the Commander of the Faithful, and He has fulfilled for him what He had pre-ordained. Praise be to God who has returned to the Commander of the Faithful his rightful [rule], and for frustrating the treachery of the one who broke his oath [i.e., al-Amīn] so that He has restored unity after dissension, reconciled the *umma* after its fragmentation, and revived the banners of the Faith after they had been tattered.²⁹

Jahshiyārī and Ṭabarī, however, seem to imply that this letter was not actually written by Ṭāhir, but was intended to seem his. In contrast to Yaʿqūbī, they say that it was after the arrival of al-Amīn’s head in Marw, and the astonishment of al-Faḍl, that al-Maʾmūn told al-Faḍl to compose a letter that could be attributed to Ṭāhir, perhaps in an effort to justify the murder. Both mention that the text of the letter that was finally adopted was by Aḥmad b. Yūsuf, an assistant scribe who at a later point would take up the position of chief *kātib* (vizir) to al-Maʾmūn, and was not sent by Ṭāhir from Baghdad as Yaʿqūbī asserts.

The divergence between the two sources can also be gauged on the level of stylistic differences in the composition style. Yaʿqūbī and Jahshiyārī provide a version that is clearly marked by an emphatic and direct style. The opening sentence is:

1) even though . . . it is clear/known that they [al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn] are to be separated.

2) This separation in the same sentence is underlined by a legal, rational, and binding verdict on the basis of “*al-kitāb wa’l-sunna*.”³⁰ Later in the text, the statement is made in conclusion in congratulation to al-Maʾmūn for receiving “back” what was his “right,” These congratulations are put in a variety of synonymous forms.

Ṭabarī’s version of the same letter, however, diverges on important details which make his version sound milder, less belligerent to al-Amīn, less enthusiastic about al-Maʾmūn’s takeover of power, and altogether more like a general factual statement on a historical theme than a propaganda message.

²⁸ The establishment of an analogy to Noah’s story draws partly on a tradition attributed to Abū Dharr who quotes the Prophet as saying, “My household is like Noah’s ark. Whoever joins it is saved, [and he who does not drowns]” (Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allah b. Muslim b. Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Maʾārif*, ed. T. ‘Ukāsha (Cairo, 1969), 252. Ibn Qutayba cites Abū Dharr as the narrator of this statement (Khaṭīb, XII, 91; brackets indicate al-Baghādādī’s addition to Ibn Qutayba’s account). ²⁹ Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 442; Jahshiyārī, 304.

³⁰ The call to abide by “*al-kitāb wa’l-sunna*” (the Book [the Qurʾān] and the tradition of the Prophet) formed a core feature of al-Maʾmūn’s early civil war propaganda.

For example, the opening sentence starts as follows: “The deposed one was the partner of the Commander of the Faithful in genealogy, however, now God has distinguished between them.” The style of this sentence is devoid of the emphatic and argumentative style of Ya‘qūbī’s text, and looks like an ordinary description. In the second sentence of the text, in addition to the lack of emphasis, Ṭabarī does not make the separation between the brothers something that can be proven on the basis of the Qur’ān (the Book) and the Sunna. Rather, it is merely stated that God has willed it to be so. By emphasizing the predestinatory nature of al-Amīn’s fall, he thus downplays the argument that centers on highlighting the flaws of al-Amīn’s personality. The downfall, therefore, is no longer the necessary and deserved fate of an incompetent ruler, but an event whose purpose is beyond the comprehension of the community. And in the conclusion, Ṭabarī is much more brief, and does not show the signs of sensationalism present in the other versions. He closes significantly omitting the statement to be found in other sources saying: “praise be to God for returning to al-Ma’mūn his rightful due (*ḥaqqahu*) [i.e., rule].”³¹

Ṭabarī also provides the text of a letter that, he says, Ṭāhir sent to al-Ma’mūn, but this letter is merely a description of the final days of the siege of Baghdad, and nowhere in it does Ṭāhir lecture al-Ma’mūn as to who might or might not be his rightful kin in the religious sense. The stylistic divergences among the sources in phrasing this letter may therefore indicate another aspect of the conflicting historiographic approaches to al-Amīn’s downfall. From the above, several aspects of al-Ma’mūn’s role can be discerned:

1) that al-Ma’mūn, unlike al-Faḍl b. Sahl, was better prepared for receiving news of the possible murder of al-Amīn;

2) that al-Ma’mūn had a well-thought-out means of justifying the event (in the form of a public letter);

3) that al-Ma’mūn sought to place the full burden of the deed on Ṭāhir. He deliberately sought to show not only that Ṭāhir personally ordered the murder but that he had a justification for the murder that was addressed to al-Ma’mūn as much as to the Muslim community at large. Al-Ma’mūn could once again appear, in this case, under the sway of powerful aides (this time the Ṭāhirids) just as he was earlier under the influence of al-Faḍl b. Sahl.

The place of al-Amīn’s regicide in the historical perception of the community

The divergence in the sources on the question of responsibility for the regicide probably grew out of the hazy conditions surrounding that controversial event. How this controversy developed in al-Ma’mūn’s camp is somewhat mysterious. The sources seem to imply that while al-Ma’mūn’s supporters

³¹ Ṭabarī, III, 950; also agreeing with Ṭabarī’s version of the letter is Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 418.

agreed on defending the political cause of al-Ma'mūn, they differed sharply on what should happen to the fallen caliph. Ibn Sahl wanted him arrested and spared, but Ṭāhir wanted him dead, while Harthama b. A'yan wanted the caliph saved from the debacle in any way. To what extent these positions spell the actual historical stances of these personalities or merely symbolize a literary commentary on the sympathies of each camp – the Sahlid, the Ṭāhirid, and the Abnā' – towards the multi-faceted identity of al-Amīn, as a monarch, an Arab leader, or an 'Abbāsīd caliph is difficult to establish, as we shall see from the narrative of the regicide.

The only thing that seems certain is that the murder of al-Amīn was an event that left a profound impression on the Islamic community to the extent that both narrators and chroniclers took part in devising and reworking various dramatic depictions in a way that underlined the resonance and particularity of this event. And although there were previous cases of caliphs who were similarly murdered before (here the murder of the caliph 'Uthmān [d. 656], companion and third successor to the Prophet, and al-Walīd II [d. 744], briefly an Umayyad caliph, might come to mind, and indeed material from these episodes would become mingled with al-Amīn's story, as we shall see below), a medieval reader would have probably placed each of these cases in a different context. Hence the magnitude of tragedy that the murder of 'Uthmān takes on in the sources derives more from the fact that such humiliation befell 'Uthmān (a personality with a saintly dimension that overshadowed his political role) than that it befell the caliphal office. Such a difference would have been especially noted in light of the fact that in the early Islamic period, the caliphal office was not yet defined according to a standard Islamic political theory, which only developed later in 'Abbāsīd times. The office of caliph in the early period was perceived and defined according to the characteristics of the personalities that filled the post. The case of al-Walīd was also anchored in a different context, since he ruled as part of the Umayyad era which was regarded in its entirety as an interregnum anti-caliphate that lacked legitimacy or religious value. Al-Amīn's case, however, fell within the era of 'Abbāsīd rule which various traditions and voices had projected as the final establishment of the destined caliphate of the Hashemites (i.e., one that combined both political and religious legitimacy).

The moral challenge associated with the regicide, however, was not a strictly Islamic issue. The fall of the 'Abbāsīd caliph was also a monarchal challenge. For, as heirs to the Sasanian monarchal tradition, the 'Abbāsīds were viewed by Muslims and non-Muslims in the Persian world as revivers and continuers of the Persian monarchal tradition stretching all the way back to the Achaemenids. The Persian monarchal institution was a highly revered cultural and religious symbol in the thought world of Persian society in general, and its aristocratic layers in particular. Presiding over an elaborate hierarchy, the monarch not only stood as the chief executor of justice, but as a symbolic focal point in the world order. Although the monarch did not hold any

exclusive spiritual powers, as the clergy did, his person projected an important mystical significance. Viewed against this background, the monarchy held a crucial dignity which was not supposed to be damaged during transitions of power, such as deposition. The *Shahnameh* encapsulates earlier Iranian literary traditions on this matter in the way it suggests a perplexed attitude when it comes to explaining and justifying the murder of Khusraw Parviz.³² The ruler's personal flaws while detrimental and in need of correction never seem to provide sufficient basis for murdering the king.³³

Closer to the Islamic conscience was the event of Yazdigard's downfall. As Islam entered Iran with the Arab conquests, the political defeat of Iran was later accepted as a religious sign. Since the Prophet was Arab, and Islam was the religion of the conquerors, it was difficult to cast the Islamic movement in a negative light while the religion was accepted. A careful look at the historiography of the Arab conquests in Persia, however, shows that the Persian authors were able to reconcile the conquests with the demise of the Sasanian monarchy. After the defeat of Nahāwand, Yazdigard, as various accounts tell us, fled eastward to Marw in order to organize a resistance movement. Once in Marw, Yazdigard's political plans were frustrated by the local governor who betrayed the king and, in alliance with the Turks, plotted to capture and murder his suzerain. Just before he was murdered, Yazdigard pleaded with his assassins to spare his life or hand him over to the Arabs, for as he put it, "they will spare the life of a king like me,"³⁴ but to no avail. And, just after recounting these final moments and the death of Yazdigard, Ṭabarī begins the account describing the arrival of 'Abdallāh b. 'Āmir's army in Khurāsān. In spite of the Arab defeat of the monarch and despite the fact that he was Zoroastrian, Persian authors could still comfortably discuss the two topics, the defeat of the Sasanids and the murder of Yazdigard, in isolation from one another. The latter event was laid at the doorstep of the Turkic world as Persia accommodated itself into the orbit of Islam.

These historical and moral sensibilities no doubt were still alive and strong in the early 'Abbāsīd period. Al-Faḍl b. Sahl, a Persian patrician and protégé of the Barmakids, who would later be accused by some of the Abnā' of attempting to use al-Ma'mūn to restore monarchal rule to the Sasanid family, must have been eager to insure that al-Ma'mūn gained the throne without causing the execution of al-Amīn. Political differences with Baghdad were one thing, ingrained moral beliefs regarding the monarchy were a different matter, and it is against this background that one has to interpret the account in *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq* recounted above which says that when al-Faḍl saw the decapitated head of al-Amīn, he bowed to it, and became annoyed with Ṭāhir's action.

³² See also Abū Manṣūr 'Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Tha'ālībī, *Ghurur Akhbār Mulūk al-Furs*, ed. and trans. H. Zotenberg as *Histoire des rois Perses* (repr. Tehran, 1963), 713–27.

³³ Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition, the Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* (Fayetteville, 1992).

³⁴ Ṭabarī, I, 2881; Humphreys, *HT*, XV, 87.

Whether we view it from the Islamic caliphal context or the secular Persian monarchical angle, therefore, the murder of al-Amīn was a drastic offense to various collective social and cultural attitudes. It stands on its own as the first of its kind in the restored ideal political order of the caliphate. And coming at the close of the second Islamic century, the regicide must have inspired millennial fears about the era that would soon follow.³⁵ Gauging the precise nature of public attitudes toward political changes in medieval times can be no more than conjectural in light of the dearth of historical evidence. However, in the chroniclers' uneven discussion of events, and given the embellished nature of the narratives, we sense a certain ordering of historical change according to a criterion of importance which must have been meaningful to the cultural and religious sensibilities of medieval society. The regicide of al-Amīn is an episode shrouded with conflicting views, but as in earlier cases such as the fall of the Barmakids and the 'Abbāsīd revolution, the chronicles succeed in conveying to us the main currents of community sentiments, if not the reality of events. 'Abbāsīd narratives are therefore literary instruments that succeed more in communicating social and intellectual moods than recounting facts.

In the course of chronicling the turmoil in Baghdad during the civil war, for example, Ṭabarī describes public anxiety over the possible murder of al-Amīn. When a coup against al-Amīn by some commanders of the Abnā' led by al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān succeeded in briefly seizing power and imprisoning al-Amīn, Ṭabarī reports, an elder member of the Abnā' stood against the rebels and declared to the public: "[Know] all you people . . . [that] there has never been a people who killed their caliph and found themselves but becoming the target of God's wrathful sword."³⁶ In the remainder of that narrative, Ṭabarī describes how the words of this leader stirred a deep sense of sympathy for the caliph among the masses, as they soon after rose in support of al-Amīn, freed, and then restored him to power.³⁷ Irrespective of the historicity of this story, its importance lies mostly in the way it meshes with other similar messages that lament the attack on the caliph's position.

Long after al-Ma'mūn returned to Baghdad from the east, we are told, he continued to sense the public's hostile looks. Once, when a Baghdadī commoner sailing on the Tigris spotted the new caliph from afar, he reportedly commented, "Do you think that I will ever regard this man [i.e., al-Ma'mūn] honorably after he killed his brother?" The statement is possibly contrived,³⁸

³⁵ W. Madelung, "New Documents concerning Al-Ma'mūn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl and 'Alī al-Riḍā," *Studia Arabica et Islamica, Festschrift for Ihsān 'Abbās*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī (Beirut, 1981), 345.

³⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 848–49; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 329.

³⁷ The episode of internal rebellion against al-Amīn clearly reflects the hesitance of the rebels to take the full step of overthrowing and executing al-Amīn.

³⁸ Khaṭīb, X, 189; Ibn Hamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, II, 163; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, I, 240; *Siyar*, X, 279; al-Suyūfī, *Ta'rīkh al-Khulafā'*, 320. Interestingly, the sources characterize this "Baghdādī commoner" as a sailor (*mallaḥ*). This choice of profession may have been inspired by the accounts that describe al-Amīn's attempted escape across the Tigris, the caliph's fall in the river, and the rescue of others (Harthama) from the river by sailors (see the capture scene below).

but it illustrates what contemporary and later medieval observers saw in the event: the vile murder of a kinsman and a reigning caliph. We here therefore do not come across an explicit legal or official statement on the position of a contemporary Islamic caliphal theory on the question of deposition, but we are given the indicators that deposition from power was an unacceptable event.

The message from the case of al-Amīn can also be read in conjunction with other statements that describe the previous 'Abbāsīd custom forbidding any injury to the person of the caliph or, indeed, any member of the dynasty. When the caliph al-Hādī in 786 (AH 170) contemplated killing his brother and heir apparent, Hārūn al-Rashīd, allegedly for the latter's depositing of the caliphal ring at the bottom of the Tigris, but more realistically for the purpose of removing al-Rashīd from the succession in favor of his own son Ja'far, an action that al-Rashīd resisted, al-Hādī was strongly warned of the possible public outcry and ramifications of harming al-Rashīd since the latter was both his brother and successor to the throne. Hence al-Hādī ordered his imprisonment only.³⁹ The public outcry that Tāhir faced the day after he finished off al-Amīn represented in large measure a response to the regicide.⁴⁰

The ramifications of al-Amīn's fall, and the public reaction to the crisis, later induced al-Ma'mūn to restore the credibility of 'Abbāsīd physical inviolability; hence his much celebrated pardon of the former pretender Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The measure seemed effective, but it left unanswered what was to be done when a holder of a political right had to be removed from power. From al-Mu'tasim down to the Turkish commanders, great imagination was invested in the crafting of an assassination that did not result in shedding blood. Conspirators were to take extra care not to appear to have done physical harm to fallen 'Abbāsīd personages, and this can be discerned in numerous cases from the mid-ninth century when the chroniclers tell us that after such-and-such a member of the family expired from starvation in prison or in another manner, his body was presented to the *'ulamā'*, the public, or both to show that he did not die of inflicted injury. This was the case with al-'Abbās b. al-Ma'mūn,⁴¹ al-Mu'ayyad,⁴² and al-Mu'tazz⁴³ where the formula "*wa ashhadu l-quḍāt wa'l-fuqahā' wa'l-shuhūd wa banī hāshim [an] la athar bihi wa lā jurh.*" ("and they [i.e., the Samārran officials] brought witnesses, who were jurists, judges, and members of the Hashemite family, to examine the fact that the deceased had no marks of injury") became a necessary characterization of the cause of death.⁴⁴ Spun out of literary fabric similar to the accounts of al-Amīn's accounts, these statements were meant to show the dramatic variance on al-Amīn's tragedy in later 'Abbāsīd times.

³⁹ Al-Qādī al-Rashīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Dhakhā'ir wa'l-Tuhaf*, ed. M. Ḥamīdullāh (Kuwait, 1959), 182. ⁴⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 929–32. ⁴¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1265.

⁴² Ṭabarī, III, 1669. ⁴³ Ṭabarī, III, 1711.

⁴⁴ The same situation can be extended even to 'Abbāsīd commanders who were eliminated in mysterious ways, such as 'Ujayf b. 'Anbasa (Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 476), and Itākh (Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 545).

The multi-layered narrative and the undercurrent of hagiographic sympathy for al-Amīn

The ambiguity of attitude toward the righteousness of al-Ma'mūn's rise to power, as shown above, manifests itself in the divergence of historical testimonies. However, if there we find a timid approach for contradicting al-Ma'mūn's propaganda on these events, we can discern a more determined effort at subverting this propaganda in the narrative of al-Amīn's final hours. The narrative of the regicide occupies a central place in the story of the civil war, and bears various dimensions of meaning that are worth examining closely.⁴⁵

Whoever composed the various parts of this narrative no doubt harbored a deep sense of sympathy for the fallen caliph. The account does not directly criticize al-Ma'mūn but, by describing the downfall of al-Amīn in vivid detail, the account seems to subvert al-Ma'mūn's propaganda of religio-political righteousness. Ṭabarī provides the fullest account of al-Amīn's final days. With little overlap, various narrators describe different moments in those fateful hours so that together the testimonies form a smooth narrative of events taking place across enemy lines. Ṭabarī begins by showing how al-Amīn, in the final days, was a victim of a circle of inept advisors or double-faced collaborators and, by listening to their advice, unwittingly entered the path that would bring about his destruction. Then, on the basis of an account relayed by al-Madā'inī, he describes how throughout these uncertain days of al-Amīn, a bitter disagreement was brewing in al-Ma'mūn's camp. Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, convinced that he himself was the source of imminent victory, was adamant that al-Amīn should surrender directly to him together with all the caliphal regalia, which he identified as the ring (*al-khātīm*); the mantle (*al-burda*), believed to have been the Prophet's; and the staff (*al-qaḍīb*), all three of which, the reporter interjects, constituted the symbols of "the caliphate" (*wa dhālika al-khilāfa*). Harthama and others were of the opinion that al-Amīn would refuse to surrender to Ṭāhir, which probably reflected their fear for al-Amīn's life rather than the possibility that his refusal would cause a stalemate. (Harthama, we are told, had secretly communicated to al-Amīn that if harm were to befall al-Amīn from either Ṭāhir or al-Ma'mūn, he would personally fight them in his defense.)

Finally Ṭāhir agreed to a compromise whereby al-Amīn would surrender to Harthama while the caliphal insignia, as defined above, would be sent to him.⁴⁶ But on the eve of the day on which this arrangement was to be implemented, Ṭāhir was cautioned of treachery and became suspicious that al-Amīn would

⁴⁵ The sources that only briefly refer to al-Amīn's fall are: Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, 395; Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḫh*, II, 441; al-Azdī, *Ta'riḫh al-Mawṣil*, 331; and among the later medieval sources, Ibn al-Sā'ī, *Mukhtaṣar Akhbār al-Khulafā'*, 37; 'Umar b. Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Dihya al-Kalbī, *al-Nibrās fī Ta'riḫh Khulafā' Banī'l-'Abbās*, ed. A. 'Azzāwī (Baghdad, 1946), 46; Ibn al-Tiqṭiqā, *al-Fakhrī*, 215; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm*, II, 159; Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allah b. As'ad al-Yāfi'ī, *Mir'āt al-Janān wa 'Ibrat al-Yaqzān fī ma Yu'tabar min Hawādith al-Zamān*, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1970), I, 461. ⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 916; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 338.

not abandon the insignia of the caliphate. On the same night, al-Amīn likewise became anxious about treachery and about the possibility that Ṭāhir's troops might storm the now unguarded Round City. So he resolved on leaving at night to go to Harthama's boat anchored just outside the Khurāsān Gate. Harthama, having received word of al-Amīn's resolution, immediately advised against it saying that there were suspicious movements by Ṭāhir's troops in the vicinity, and that he feared if things were to come to a scuffle, he (Harthama) might be outnumbered and defeated. Al-Amīn, however, feeling greatly vulnerable after being abandoned by his guard, decided to go ahead.

Continuing his account from Madā'inī, Ṭabarī then cites Muḥammad b. 'Isā al-Julūdī⁴⁷ as narrator. He describes how al-Amīn ordered that his favourite mare, al-Zuhrī (al-Zuhayrī according to al-Mas'ūdī), be saddled and then bid farewell to his two children, embracing them and tearfully telling them: "I leave you in God's trust." He then wiped his tears with his sleeve, mounted his horse in a single jump, and rode with his servant, the narrator of this report, Muḥammad b. 'Isā al-Julūdī, who says:

Ahead of us, one candle lighted the way. When we got to the peripheral arcades (*al-tāqāt*) just before the Gate of Khurāsān, my father then told me "protect him [i.e., al-Amīn] with your arms lest he get hit." Thus I did until we got to the Gate of Khurāsān, which we ordered opened. Then we went down to the shore where Harthama's boat was anchored, but as we rode to board it, [al-Amīn's] horse suddenly came to a halt. It refused to move until he struck it with the whip, at which point it went on board. Al-Amīn then dismounted and his horse retraced its way back!⁴⁸

The next report from that moment on is narrated by Aḥmad b. Sallām, an official who had held a post in the judiciary (*ṣāhib al-mazālim*) in al-Amīn's reign. Ibn Sallām picks up the story from the previous narrator inside the boat. He tells how when al-Amīn descended to the lower deck to the chamber of Harthama where his staff was in council, they all rose in respect except for Harthama who apologized for an illness that prevented him from doing so. Instead, Harthama fell to his knees and gave al-Amīn a full embrace, kissing his eyes, hands, and feet, and addressing him "O my master and son of my

⁴⁷ The author *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq* (p. 338), as well as Mas'ūdī in his *Murūj* (IV, 294–95), recount a shortened version of Ṭabarī's account and leave out the narrator's name.

⁴⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 918–19. In contrast, al-Mas'ūdī's report says that al-Amīn killed his horse before boarding the boat: see *Murūj*, IV, 293. Whichever account we accept, the chroniclers agree in focusing on the horse as an image of monarchical power. Al-Amīn's gloomy image of departure from the Round City on horseback and Mas'ūdī's reference to the demise of the horse both provide oblique hints at the fate of al-Amīn's monarchy through the symbolism of the horse. Al-Amīn's release of the horse indicates his preparedness to pass the caliphate on to his successor, and thereby underlines the autonomy of the caliphal institution from his person; an autonomy which is only offset by the horse's attachment to him when it refuses to let him board the boat where he will surrender. The horse as the symbol of royal authority derives from the Persian monarchical tradition with its emphasis on the image of the coronation of Sasanian rulers on horseback, such as those depicted in the rock carvings of Persepolis and Bīshāphūr. The use of this imagery continued to thrive well into the Buyid era. See H. Busse, "The Revival of Persian Kingship under the Buyids," *Islamic Civilization 950–1150* ed. D. S. Richards (Oxford, 1973), 63.

master” (*yā sayyīdī wa mawlāy wa ibn sayyīdī wa mawlāy*). In those moments, al-Amīn gazed around the assembly and acknowledged various members of Harthama’s staff, and specifically thanked one of them for rendering him a favor.⁴⁹ While this was going on, the boat suddenly came under attack by Ṭāhir’s men, who began drilling holes in its hull and overturned it. As everyone fell into the water, al-Amīn made his way to the shore with his clothes torn. The account then digresses to describe how Ibn Sallām escaped to shore and came close to being killed but was imprisoned in a house instead.⁵⁰ He then tells how al-Amīn was brought into the same house by a group of Persian speakers. Ibn Sallām’s account here runs as follows:

He [i.e., Ṭāhir’s lieutenant] took me into the house and commanded his slaves to keep me. He gave them orders and instructions. He found out from me the news about Muḥammad and how he had fallen into the water; so he went to Ṭāhir to tell him the news about him. He turned out to be Ibrāhīm al-Balkhī. His slaves took me into one of the rooms of the house. There were reed mats in it, two or three pillows – and [in one version] some rolled up mats. I sat down in the room. They brought a lamp into it, checked the door of the house, and sat down to talk. After an hour of the night had passed, we suddenly heard horses moving. People knocked on the door. It was opened for them, and they entered, saying, “Pusar-i Zubayda!” A man was brought in to me, unclothed, wearing drawers, a turban veiling his face, and a tattered piece of cloth on his shoulders. They put him with me, ordered those in the house to guard him, and left additional men behind with them.

After the man had settled down in the room, he removed the turban from his face. It was Muḥammad! I wept and said to myself, “Surely we belong to God, and to Him

⁴⁹ The wording of this report in Ṭabarī is the following: “[al-Amīn] began to examine our faces. He looked at ‘Ubaydallāh b. al-Waḍḍāḥ and said to him, ‘Which of them are you?’ He replied, ‘I am ‘Ubaydallāh b. al-Waḍḍāḥ.’ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘May God reward you well. How thankful I am for what you did in the matter of the snow! If I meet my brother, may God preserve him, I will not fail to praise you before him and ask him to reward you on my behalf’” (Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 190). Although it is not clear what al-Amīn was here referring to in his thankful comment to ‘Ubaydallāh b. al-Waḍḍāḥ, this exchange is important because it shows that al-Amīn, now having surrendered to Harthama, envisaged a meeting with al-Ma’mūn. This may imply that Harthama was planning to reconcile the brothers, and not merely provide al-Amīn with an escape route.

⁵⁰ Ibn Sallām’s arrest represents a pivotal development in the account of al-Amīn’s downfall, and for this is worth some scrutiny. His testimony says that when he came ashore he was arrested by one of Ṭāhir’s men, and was then brought to a commander who interrogated him. When asked about his identity, Ibn Sallām pretended to be *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* (police chief), a claim the commander immediately dismissed as a lie, but proceeded anyway to ask him about the fate of al-Amīn. To this question Ibn Sallām answered, “I saw him [i.e., al-Amīn] when he tore his clothes [here clearly referring to the black caliphal garments] and dived into the water.” This tip surely enlightened al-Ma’mūn’s commanders about the appearance of the fugitive caliph, and quickened the search for him that night. Ibn Sallām was then put in chains and forced to march with the soldiers, but the latter quickly became annoyed that he was failing to keep up with them so they discussed the need to kill him. Sensing this, Ibn Sallām now implored the commanding soldier to spare him, promising to pay him 10,000 dirhams if he would only imprison him, and hence allow him the chance to send a messenger for the money. Considering this to be a reasonable offer, the commander consented and had him locked up in a house (Ṭabarī, III, 920–22). The translation of the passage describing al-Amīn’s imprisonment is based on Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 192.

we return.” He began looking at me and said, “Which of them are you?” I said, “I am your *mawlā* Master.” “Which of the *mawālī*?” he asked. I said, “Aḥmad b. Sallām, the official in charge of petitions and complaints.” “I know you from somewhere else,” he said. “You used to come to me in al-Raqqā.” “Yes,” I said. He said, “You used to come to me and often show me kindness. You are not my *mawlā*; you are my brother and one of my own [family].” Then he said, “Aḥmad –.” “At your service, master,” I said. “Come close to me,” he said, “and hold me. I feel very frightened.” So I held him to myself. His heart was beating so hard that it was about to burst his chest and come out. I kept holding him to me and calming him. Then he said, “Aḥmad, what has happened to my brother?” I said, “He is alive.” “May God bring evil upon their postmaster!” he said. “What a liar he is! He said that he had died.” He seemed to be apologizing for waging war against him. I said, “Rather, may God bring evil on your ministers!” “Say nothing but good about my ministers,” he said, “for they are not at fault. I am not the first person to have sought a thing and been unable to achieve it.” Then he said, “Aḥmad what do you think they will do to me? Do you think they will kill me, or will they keep their oaths (*aymān*) to me?”⁵¹ I said, “No, they will keep them for you, master.” He began to draw around himself the tattered rag that was on his shoulders, drawing it and holding it with his upper arm on the right and left. I took off a lined cloak that I was wearing and said, “Master, throw this over you,”⁵² but al-Amīn proudly refused, saying, “leave me to my own. This is but from God, and I am rewarded in this position (*lī fī ḥādha l-mawḍī‘ khayr*).”⁵³

Ibn Sallām then says:

As we were in this situation, someone [Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Ṭāhirī] entered in full armor. He stared hard at him [al-Amīn] and left.⁵⁴ I knew that he was a dead man, so I wanted to perform my prayers, but al-Amīn told me to do so while remaining close to him, for he felt great anxiety. So I did.⁵⁵ Then when it was around midnight, I heard the noise of horses, there was a knock at the door [of the house] and when it was opened, a group of Persians entered with their swords drawn. When he [al-Amīn] saw them, he said, “We are God’s and to Him we shall return! By God my soul is now going

⁵¹ Tabarī, III, 922; elsewhere “*amān*” (promise of safety) instead of “*aymān*”. See Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 414; *al-Uyūn wa’l-Ḥadā’iq*, 340; *al-Kāmil*, VI, 286.

⁵² Tabarī, III, 921–22. Translation in Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 191–92.

⁵³ Ibn al-Athīr and Dhahabī here add the emphasis (*lī fī ḥadha l-mawḍī‘ khayrun kathīr*); *al-Kāmil*, VI, 286; Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, XII, 61.

⁵⁴ Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Ṭāhirī was a client of Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn. He appears in Tabarī in another story that complements the present one. Al-Ḥasan b. Abī Sa’īd narrates on the authority of Khaṭṭāb b. Ziyād who says, “I was in the entourage of [Ṭāhir] with al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Ma’mūnī and al-Ḥasan al-kabīr al-khādīm for al-Rashīd, when he [Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd] caught up with us and told him [Ṭāhir] that he had captured Muḥammad [al-Amīn] and that he had sent him [under guard] to the house of Ibrāhīm al-Balkhī at the Gate of al-Kūfa.” Khaṭṭāb then says, “Ṭāhir then looked at us and said, ‘What do you recommend?’ Al-Ma’mūnī told him in Persian, ‘Makun’ [Don’t do it], that is, don’t do like al-Ḥusayn b. Alī [b. ‘Isā b. Māhān],” (here interpreting the phrase by referring to al-Ḥusayn’s earlier imprisonment of al-Amīn during the civil war, and the fact that al-Amīn was later able to free himself and reorganize support which drove al-Ḥusayn out of Baghdad). Khaṭṭāb then says, “so Ṭāhir called a servant of his called Quraysh al-Dandānī and ordered him to kill Muḥammad [al-Amīn]” (Tabarī, III, 917–18).

⁵⁵ Tabarī provides another slightly different version of Ibn Sallām’s account, where the latter says that on that night he taught al-Amīn how to ask God for forgiveness, which al-Amīn began saying.

in the path of God (*fī sabīl allāh*). Is there no alternative? Is there no helper? Is there none of the Abna'?" Then they came to the door of the house in which we were, but they hesitated from entering, although each started inciting the other to enter first. I retreated behind a stack of mats rolled up in the corner of the room while Muḥammad picked up a pillow (*wisāda*) in his hand and said, "Woe on you! I am the cousin of the Messenger of God; I am the son of Hārūn; I am the brother of al-Ma'mūn. Fear [you not] God for my blood?" One of them came in to him – he was named Khumārawayh and was a slave (*ghulām*) of Quraysh al-Dandānī, Ṭāhir's *mawlā*. He struck him a blow with the sword. It landed on the front of his head. Muḥammad struck his face with the pillow that was in his hand and leaned on him to take the sword from his hand. Khumārawayh shouted in Persian, "He's killed me! He's killed me!"

In the following minutes other men entered on the scene, and a scuffle took place in which al-Amīn was overpowered and decapitated.⁵⁶

The presence of this detailed and tragic narrative of regicide in the sources poses a historiographical problem. For, in light of the customary hostile treatment that al-Amīn receives in the sources, we might well expect a somewhat different story for the circumstances of the murder. A story that is briefer, dwells minimally on the picture of suffering, and builds up al-Amīn's downfall as an inescapable and deserved fate for his unrepentant bent toward treachery would logically better fit with the propagandistic intent of the sources. One such version of the regicide actually survives in the form of a letter sent to al-Ma'mūn by Ṭāhir announcing the fall of Baghdad. In it Ṭāhir lays out a self-justifying background for the murder by saying that it was al-Amīn's attempt to break the capitulation treaty that led to these events. Instead of abandoning the caliphal insignia (the Prophet's mantle, sword, and staff), Ṭāhir says, al-Amīn was caught with his slave Kawthar, who was carrying the insignia. And even after being arrested, al-Amīn, Ṭāhir states, still attempted to exercise his cunning by offering to bribe his captors to release him, except that the soldiers "insisted on being loyal to their caliph, on upholding their religion, and on preferring their bounden duty."⁵⁷

Stretched and transparent as it may be, the story told by Ṭāhir prepares the way for an explanation of the regicide as a response, an accident perhaps, to al-Amīn's attempt to break the treaty, and steal the caliphal insignia.⁵⁸ It is filled with those religious labels characterizing righteousness and transgression that clearly show Ma'mūnid propaganda at work. In contrast the narrative of regicide described above is devoid of any indication of treachery. The underlying sense of the story there is that al-Amīn was seeking to fulfill the agreement of surrender, and perhaps reach his brother (note the analogy with al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī's futile attempt to obtain passage to meet Yazīd), while Ṭāhir was ignoring the jurisdiction of Harthama over the matter, and when he finally

⁵⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 923; similar versions in *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 340, *Murūj*, IV, 294.

⁵⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 929; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 200.

⁵⁸ These are charges which echo similar earlier accusations that al-Amīn broke Hārūn al-Rashīd's succession covenants, and attempted to sequester al-Ma'mūn's wealth.

seized al-Amīn, he decided on the execution on his own. Al-Amīn was bound to be a victim whether or not he abandoned the insignia, and irrespective of his possible admission of fault, because Ṭāhir, after consulting his lieutenants, had made up his mind already.

In the careful positioning of actors' testimonies and actions one can discern a shadow opinion of the chronicler coming through. In his account of the final day of al-Amīn, Ṭabarī, as we saw, mentions that a deal was reached between al-Amīn and Ṭāhir through Harthama's mediation that would have allowed al-Amīn a peaceful surrender to Harthama in exchange for leaving the insignia behind. We have seen the conflicting reports about how both Ṭāhir and al-Amīn suspected each other of planning to renege on the promise. Ṭabarī does not state openly who betrayed the agreement and was responsible for the ensuing tragedy. Rather, he lays out the conflicting accusations. It is not until al-Amīn's final moments – an occasion he depicts with a solemnity that lends an irresistible air of sincerity and trustworthiness to what is said there – that Ṭabarī, by having al-Amīn wonder if his opponents will respect their promise to him, finally points at the possibility that it was Ṭāhir who betrayed the agreement. In the face of the testimony of al-Amīn, Ṭāhir's accusation of treachery against him, which is only mentioned in the dubious letter to al-Ma'mūn informing him of victory, becomes worthless. Al-Amīn's personality is endowed with a new credibility and tragic sympathy in these images of dramatic downfall. Al-Amīn's frustration with his advisors, his agony at parting with his sons, his desperate bid to escape, the pitiful plea with the assassins, and his helpless attempt at self-defense all underscore a sympathetic attitude on the part of the narrator that cannot be separated as a description from the actual opinions that narrators must have intended to communicate.⁵⁹

To be sure, in open terms, the account still falls short of reversing the standard imagery of the brothers openly, and offering a direct criticism of al-Ma'mūn. The traditional lenses for representing the brothers are maintained. Al-Amīn remains in the limelight and his image barely improves to show him innocent and gullible, such as when he inquires about the fate of his brother and places his trust in his advisor. However, one can perhaps argue that the text does more in support of the fallen caliph. Upon a reflective reading of the narrative, we can sense that the punishing character of the story of downfall actually carries a redemptive religious quality. When al-Amīn rejects Ibn Sallām's offer to clothe him with a cloak (i.e., a reinvestiture to the caliphate by a man symbolizing *mawālī* support) he declares, "leave me to my own, for I am rewarded in this position." The statement can be read in two ways. In one respect, al-Amīn's rejection of Ibn Sallām's offer implies an unconscious but correct instinctive suspicion of Ibn Sallām's role. The caliph does not know that Ibn Sallām had betrayed him, but is shown reacting in a way that implies

⁵⁹ Gabrieli mentions that it is unlikely that all the accounts about the events preceding the regicide could have all happened within the two days spanning these events (Gabrieli, "Successione," 388).

a correct assessment. In a second, more important way, al-Amīn's statement represents an admission of guilt, whereby this admission connotes the orthodox religious view that in this lies forgiveness.⁶⁰ From here on al-Amīn's suffering takes on a meritorious character. He renounces his interest in the caliphate and, according to Mas'ūdī's version, denounces political leadership, when he says that "kingship is a barren thing that recognizes no kin-tie (*inna l-mulka 'aqīmun la raḥima lahu*),"⁶¹ and announces that his death is martyrdom; hence a fulfillment of al-Rashīd's earlier prayer.

Viewed on the level of thematic organization, therefore, the regicide of al-Amīn reveals a strong degree of sympathetic involvement on the part of a narrator. This is not a phenomenon peculiar to Islamic history. Chroniclers in various societies have long contemplated hard the moment of deposition, and often have been driven to look kindly on a fallen monarch. The case of the English monarch Richard II here comes to mind as one of the most memorable in English political culture on account of the literary embellishment of the story. In both cases, those of al-Amīn and Richard, we encounter parallel trajectories of downfall. Both start out being accused of abuse of power, of misgovernment, of surrounding themselves with men of inferior birth who flatter them and lead them to make wrong decisions. And in the end both suffer humiliating ends which instill in them a sense of wisdom, and mark their spiritual rebirth. The description of the physical humbleness of the monarch generally seems to be very evocative in the Christian context because of the symbolic interconnection between the concepts of temporal and spiritual kingship. The classic Christian image of the culminating humility of the Christ-king endowed scenes of monarchical suffering with a religious quality that is as meritorious as it is redemptive for the political order and society.⁶²

⁶⁰ We have seen in the story of the Barmakid tragedy the philosophical conception, stated by Yahyā al-Barmakī, that correlated earthly suffering with atonement and redemption. Balādhurī seems to point to a parallel conception when he quotes 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar as saying, after seeing the ruthless policies of Ziyād b. Abīhi, "O God, verily you grant atonement to whom you choose of those who get murdered, and I ask you that you only let Ibn Sumayya die, and not get murdered" (*Allahumma inna fī l-qatlī kaffāratān li-man tashā'u min khalqika wa inni as'aluka li-ibni Sumayya mawtān lā qatān*: Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf* vol. I, Banū 'Abd Shams, ed. I. 'Abbās, [pt. 4] [Wiesbaden, 1979], 277).

⁶¹ Mas'ūdī's version of the regicide narrative largely mirrors Tabarī's, except at a few junctures. When al-Amīn converses with Ibn Sallām during their confinement, he asks Ibn Sallām, "They perhaps will carry me off to my brother, do you think he will order my death?" and Ibn Sallām replies, saying, "I doubt it. The tie of kinship will surely soften him." To this then al-Amīn responds by saying, "Alas, Kingship is a barren thing that recognizes no kin-tie (*inna al-mulka 'aqīmun lā raḥima lah*)." Al-Amīn's answer represents an echo of a statement attributed to Yahyā al-Barmakī where the latter says, "There is no kin-tie between kings and others (*la arḥāma bayna l-mulūk wa bayna aḥād*": Jahshiyārī, 201). Tabarī also has the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik state something similar after his victory over Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr. After the death of Muṣ'ab, 'Abd al-Malik reportedly said, "Provide him with a decent burial. For, by God, we did have a close relation with him, but kingship is barren (*wārūh fā-qad wa-llāhi kānat l-hurma baynanā wa baynahu qadīma wa lākinnā hadha l-mulka 'aqīmun*": Tabarī, II, 811).

⁶² Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), 24–41.

This classic intellectual paradigm of Christianity, however, did not apply in the case of Islam and the caliphate. There was no parallel paradigm to mitigate the moral defeat that a Muslim caliph's downfall symbolized.⁶³ In spite of this, however, Muslim chroniclers still sought to endow the caliph's downfall with a praiseful character, and to this end, they set out constructing a hagiographic web of representation.

Long before the caliph pronounced his death to be martyrdom, the chroniclers offer hagiographic clues that sought to alert the caliph, and hinder the coming of tragedy. When the horse carrying the caliph from the Round City to the shore of the Tigris refused to march on to the boat where al-Amīn first came under attack, we sense the narrator's hint that here even the horse, subject to a natural impulse, was attempting to save the caliph by signaling imminent danger. This, combined with the description of al-Amīn's religious protests against the assassins, the prostration of Ibn Sahl before the decapitated head of al-Amīn, and the testimony of the guard who was entrusted the safekeeping of the head, who implied that even two years after the murder the color of al-Amīn's complexion remained unchanged,⁶⁴ all highlight a hagiographic portrayal of al-Amīn as a supernatural personality endowed with miraculous signs.

Stylistic crossovers among three murders

The unique historical meaning of al-Amīn's downfall did not prevent narrators from drawing on earlier representations of other examples of caliphal regicide, specifically the cases of 'Uthmān and al-Walīd II. Although the personalities of these two caliphs, as mentioned before, are polar opposites in terms of character, piety, and accomplishments, narrators generally concur in sounding a grieved note in the representation of both tragedies. In both situations, narrators concur in the way they address the same core moral problem, namely, whether it is legitimate to use force to depose a reigning monarch, and how this political upheaval can bring a social and religious shakeup in the life and fate of the community. From 'Uthmān to al-Walīd II to al-Amīn, narrators wrestled with the recurrence of the same religio-political question, and saw the magnification of the community's social and political turmoil in the aftermath of regicide.

In particular we can discern considerable similarities between the cases of al-Walīd II and al-Amīn. On the whole, both caliphs receive tarnished portraits in the sources as impious and incompetent, although al-Amīn does not come across as deranged and worthless as the Umayyad figure. From the story of their murders, described most fully in Ṭabarī's chronicle, we find various

⁶³ Stylistically, nevertheless, it is difficult not to see how the Islamic account betrays some Christian influences. The image of the caliph's suffering and his betrayal by one of his close associates for a sum of money points to similar motifs from the story of Jesus.

⁶⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 925.

thematic and literary connections that bring them together at the end. Both caliphs enter a phase of awakening and sober reflection in their last hours, and sense imminent death. In both cases, the caliphs feel isolated from their social circles as their end nears and feel that all their supporters have betrayed them. Suddenly the caliph becomes surrounded by materialist and ambitious figures who care little for negotiating with him. Al-Walīd's statement when the assassins approach him, "Isn't there anyone amongst you who is an honorable man of noble descent and who has a proper sense of shame, to whom I can speak" (*amā fi-kum rajulun sharīfun lahu ḥasabun wa ḥayā'un ukallimuhu*)⁶⁵ parallels al-Amīn's cry to his assassins, asking if there were not anyone of the Abnā' left to help him. Al-Walīd's statement to Yazīd b. 'Anbasa, "Did I not increase your stipends? Did I not remove onerous taxes from you? Did I not make gifts to your poor and give servants to your cripples?"⁶⁶ parallels similar words spoken by al-Amīn as he made his final appearance to his supporters in Baghdad.⁶⁷ In both cases, we encounter the medieval narrators' shared view that associates evil with characters of low social status, and the idea that these actors are prone toward misdeeds and treachery despite various acts of generosity and sympathy that they may have experienced from their suzerain.

An extended level of comparison between the two caliphs can be established in an account signaling the ominous fate of al-Walīd. As he meets a close companion, on his last days, al-Walīd recalls advance omens dating to the reign of Hishām, signaling his ill-fortune. The statements were made, al-Walīd says, at the time when al-Zuhrī, the religious scholar, was visiting Hishām. Al-Walīd was then still an heir apparent when both caliph and scholar started deprecating his person.⁶⁸ Al-Walīd did not stay around to hear the important part of what the two men discussed, but later he heard from a person who was with them throughout something that worried him about the prospects of his rule. Now recalling that meeting, al-Walīd would tell his companion with a desperate melancholic sense, "Verily, I am finished, the cross-eyed [i.e., Hishām] had said it. (*dhahaba l-aḥwal bi-ʿumrī*)."⁶⁹ Hoping to lift al-Walīd's morale, the companion tells him, "Never mind what happened. God will surely extend your life and make your reign a cause of felicity for the community (*bal yuṭīlu allāhu ʿumraka yā amīr l-muʾminīn wa yumattiʿu l-ummata bi-baqāʾika*)."⁷⁰ Both the psychological nature of al-Walīd in making his statement, and the swift, polite, and encouraging response from the companion to the caliph echo, in a conflated way, similar exchanges on the last days of al-Amīn. The reminiscing and desperate mood shown by al-Walīd evokes the scene showing al-Amīn's premonition of imminent disaster, as depicted in the narrative "al-Amīn by the River." Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī's encouraging role in relation to al-Amīn in that narrative represents a revival of the role of al-Walīd's friend. And there is the even closer connection between the situation of al-Walīd with his friend

⁶⁵ Tabarī, II, 1800; Hillenbrand, *HT*, XXVI, 153.

⁶⁶ Tabarī, II, 1799; Hillenbrand, *HT*, XXVI, 153.

⁶⁷ Tabarī, III, 931–32.

⁶⁸ Tabarī, II, 1811.

⁶⁹ Tabarī, II, 1811.

and the description of al-Amīn's conversation with 'Abdallāh b. Sallām just before the execution. As shown in that narrative, recounted above, al-Amīn also shows a sober reflective mood as he expresses his desperation to Ibn Sallām. When al-Amīn wonders rhetorically whether his brother's generals would fulfill their oaths and promise of safety to him, Ibn Sallām quickly encourages the caliph, saying, "Indeed, they will fulfill their oaths (*bal yafūn laka bi-aymānihim*)."⁷⁰ The timing and construction of this response is a direct derivation of the situation of al-Walīd recounted above.

A further connection between the story of al-Walīd with his companion and the scene of "al-Amīn by the River" can be discerned in the conclusion of al-Walīd's story. Just after al-Walīd recounted the story of Hishām, expressed sadness over the future, and the companion comes in with his encouraging words, Ṭabarī states:

[al-Walīd] called for supper and we ate it. When it was time for the evening prayer, we performed it and we conversed until the hour for the late night prayer. After we had prayed, al-Walīd sat down and asked for something to drink, and they brought in a covered vessel. Three slave girls came and they lined up between him and me (*saffaḡna bayna yadayhi baynī wa baynahu*). Then al-Walīd began to drink, they went away and we chatted. When al-Walīd asked for another drink, the slave girls did as they did before. Al-Walīd went on talking and asking for more to drink, and the slave girls continued bringing him wine until dawn. I counted that he drunk seventy cups.⁷⁰

The quick shift of the caliph from reflection to wine drinking is similar to the context of the gathering of al-Amīn and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The two narratives resemble one another most closely when the narrator describes how, when the wine was brought, three concubines (singers) performed a clapping number before the caliph and his guest, and kept repeating this action, as the caliph kept having his goblet filled (seventy times), until the break of dawn. The tripartite entertainment session at the end of al-Walīd's narrative mirrors the tripartite singing scene in al-Amīn narrative, and also connects with the tripartite scene of prophecy in the narrative "Zubayda's Nightmare." The systematic arrangement of the objects and motifs in all three scenes around the three-something form suggests a narrator's continuing effort to tie in with earlier imagery by transposing motifs.⁷¹

Another connection between the murder scenes of al-Walīd and al-Amīn can be found in the usage of the motif of the wall. The narrator describes how, on the day of the murder of al-Walīd, the assassins climbed over a wall to get to al-Walīd's chamber.⁷² This image, which was earlier applied in the depiction of the scene of 'Uthmān's murder, no doubt preserves a remnant of the props used in the theatrical performance of these dramatic texts. In the case of al-Amīn, while we do not have mention of someone descending a wall to reach

⁷⁰ Ṭabarī, II, 1811–12, Hillenbrand, *HT*, XXVI, 165–66.

⁷¹ The three-something choice taken in the scenario may have been intended to hint a connection with the concept of *qadar* (fate), a three-lettered Arabic word. For similar organizational strategies, see *Murūj*, IV, 205–06, 262. ⁷² Ṭabarī, II, 1800.

al-Amīn, the motif is used in a relevant dream that al-Amīn had in his last days. When al-Amīn's advisors suggested he surrender to Ṭāhir instead of Harthama, the caliph reportedly strongly reacted against this idea, telling them that he hated the thought of surrendering to Ṭāhir because in a dream, a few days earlier, the caliph said,

[I had seen] . . . as if I were standing on a brick wall towering into the sky, broadbased and firm; never have I seen one like it in length, breadth, and firmness. I was wearing my black robes, my belt, my sword, my hat, and my boots. Ṭāhir was at the base of the wall, and he kept striking its base until the wall fell. I fell and my hat fell from my head. I have an ominous feeling about Ṭāhir. I am uneasy about him and therefore do not want to go out to him. But Harthama is our mawla and like a father. I am more comfortable with him and trust him more.⁷³

Although it is not exactly clear what the wall signified in the context of the caliphs' reigns, there is a clear recurrence of the image of the wall in connection with issues of political succession. The wall image, which also surfaces in the reign of al-Manṣūr with reference to ʿĪsā b. Mūsā,⁷⁴ may have originally been borrowed from a Qurʾānic image depicting the wall in various contexts.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ṭabarī, III, 913; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 184. The account is narrated on the authority of Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā al-Julūdī.

⁷⁴ When al-Manṣūr intended to transfer the succession from his uncle to his son al-Mahdī, Ṭabarī tells us, the caliph devised various means for intimidating ʿĪsā b. Mūsā to give up his right of succession. In one of the various ploys used by the caliph, we are told, ʿĪsā would happen to be seated in the shade of a wall (presumably out in a courtyard in the caliph's palace), when he would suddenly find people attempting to chip the wall on him. The relevant narrative states,

Then al-Manṣūr became rougher...ʿĪsā would be waiting in an anteroom with one of his sons and hear digging in the walls, and fear that the wall was going to fall upon him. Dust would be sprinkled upon him, and looking up at a wooden beam in the ceiling, he would perceive that it had been bored into from one side so as to move and let dust be strewn on his *qalansuwa* and his clothing. He would order his son to move over, and he would rise and say his prayers. Then he would be given permission to enter, and he would go in just as he was, with the dust upon him, not brushing it off. When al-Manṣūr saw him, he would say "ʿĪsā, no one ever comes in here looking as you do, with so much dust and dirt on you! Is all that from the streets?" And he would say "I suppose it is, Commander of the Faithful." Al-Manṣūr would only speak this way to him in order to induce him to make some complaint, and he would not complain (Ṭabarī, III, 333; Williams, *Early ʿAbbāsī Empire*, I, 189).

⁷⁵ The imagery here comes from the Qurʾānic story of Moses' encounter with a mysterious figure, al-Khiḍr. In one part of that famous account, al-Khiḍr astonishes Moses by setting about reconstructing a ruined wall in a town where no one showed them hospitality. Later, after the two were about to go their separate ways, al-Khiḍr explained to Moses the rationale behind his actions. Regarding the wall, al-Khiḍr explained, it belonged to two orphan children in the city, and there was under it a treasure which belonged to them. The verse continues, "Their father was a righteous man; and thy Lord desired that they should come of age and then bring forth their treasure as a mercy from thy Lord. I did it not of my own bidding. This is the interpretation of that thou couldst not bear patiently" (Qurʾān 18:82; the full account, Qurʾān 18:60–82; translation in Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, I, 324–26). It is hard not to imagine that the context of two children was not connected by narrators to the situation of al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, especially in view of the orthodox depiction of their father. Al-Rashīd, like the deceased father of the orphans, had little control over what was going to happen with his children. (We may also note here al-Amīn's mention in the "wall story" that Harthama is like a father to him). The Qurʾānic story of Moses and al-Khiḍr may have also inspired the scene

By far the most famous feature surrounding the death of al-Walīd is connected to the story of ‘Uthmān, who was killed while reading the Qur’ān. Just after al-Walīd’s negotiation with his opponents broke down, chroniclers tell us, al-Walīd returned to his inner chamber, reached out for a copy of the Qur’ān, and held it, saying “This is a day like the day of ‘Uthmān.”⁷⁶ Viewed against al-Walīd’s checkered past, the gesture might be received by the reader with little credence, but it still retains sufficient power to evoke in an ominous way the potential recurrence of chaos and strife that followed ‘Uthmān’s death, which once again could lead to the breakdown of the Islamic state (although from a different angle, the ‘Abbāsids would portray this change – with al-Walīd’s fall – as the auspicious turn toward the revolution and the establishment of a pious Islamic state). The significance of the scene of ‘Uthmān’s death while reading the Qur’ān lies not only in the pietistic symbolism associated with that event and the general religious critique of a violent political change, but is based also on the further statement by Ṭabarī, which tells us that when ‘Uthmān was stabbed, blood from his fatal wound flowed on the Qur’ānic verse which reads “*fasayakfikaḥumu allāh*,”⁷⁷ thereby prophesying that God would avenge the murder of the caliph.⁷⁸ Al-Walīd’s case does not go to the same hagiographic extents as ‘Uthmān’s case does, nor does al-Amīn’s. What we do get in the case of al-Amīn, however, is a transposition of a feature in ‘Uthmān’s story that shows a subtle undercurrent of sympathy for al-Amīn which exceeds the support that al-Walīd receives. We detect this sympathetic voice for al-Amīn not in the narrative of the murder, but in an anecdote stored under the biographical information about Hārūn al-Rashīd and his reign. There Ṭabarī reports that Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq al-Iṣfahānī said that al-Mufaḍḍal b. Muḥammad al-Ḍabbī, the famous grammarian, said:

Al-Rashīd once sent for me. It was at night when I suddenly saw his messengers at my door. They said: “Answer the call of the Commander of the Faithful.” So I went to him. It was a Thursday. When I entered, I saw him reclining with Muḥammad b. Zubayda [i.e., al-Amīn] seated on his left hand side and al-Ma’mūn on his right.⁷⁹ I greeted him, and he signalled for me to be seated. He then said:

“O Mufaḍḍal.”

“I am at your service Commander of the Faithful,” I said.

footnote 75 (cont.)

where Ṭāhir’s troops drill holes into al-Amīn’s boat. One perhaps can also connect the fate of al-Amīn with the third part of al-Khiḍr’s story where we hear he killed a lad for no reason. When asked about that action, he responded that the child was a malicious boy who would have “grieved his parents with his insolence and ingratitude to God” (*wa ammā l-ghulām fa-khashaynā an yurhiqahumā tughyānan wa kufrā*) had he lived (Qur’ān 18:80). The relation between the Qur’ānic account and the story of al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn is not a perfectly symmetrical one, but is predicated on shifting roles, and alternating realities and fates.

⁷⁶ Ṭabarī, II, 1800. ⁷⁷ Qur’ān 2:137.

⁷⁸ Ṭabarī, I, 3007; Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, *Ta’rīkh*, ed. A. D. al-‘Umarī (al-Najaf, 1967), 175; Balādhurī, *Banū ‘Abd Shams*, 591; *al-Kāmil*, III, 179; Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, III, 457.

⁷⁹ Note the reversal in the seating arrangement from the anecdote “Hārūn’s Premonition of the Civil War.”

"How many grammatical subjects [references to names] are there in the word *fasayakfīkahumu* [He shall thwart them for you]," he asked.

"Three subjects," I said.

"What are they," he inquired.

"The letter '*kāf*' [i.e., the pronoun suffix *-ka*] refers to the Messenger of God, the '*hā*' and '*mīm*' [i.e., the pronoun suffix *-humu*] refer to the unbelievers, and the '*yā*' refers to God the Almighty."

"You have spoken correctly," he said. "Thus this scholar (*al-shaykh*) has informed us," pointing to al-Kisā'ī [also a famous grammarian of Hārūn's reign and tutor to al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn]. Then he turned to Muḥammad and said, "Do you understand now, Muḥammad?" to which Muḥammad said "Yes." So al-Rashīd said, "then repeat to me the answer of al-Mufaḍḍal," which he did.⁸⁰

This anecdote may seem like a mere recounting of a grammatical exercise, but in view of the scene of 'Uthmān's murder, and the pattern of his injury, and the blood-staining of the Qur'ān on the verse in question, we can discern a critical voice directed toward the assassins of al-Amīn, Ṭāhir and al-Ma'mūn.⁸¹ Al-Rashīd specifically addresses his query to al-Amīn and asks him whether he has become convinced of it (i.e., that such a fate would befall him and/or that God will suffice him), as if al-Amīn had refused to accept al-Mufaḍḍal's grammatical interpretation when given by Kisā'ī earlier.⁸² The reader, already prepared by the chronicler who described al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn's thorough knowledge of the Qur'ān,⁸³ would have been reassured that in the end al-Amīn grasped the message. How or when this report was fabricated cannot be exactly determined, but one need no more proof that it is than the fact that its alleged narrator al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī was dead by the year AH 170,⁸⁴ that is the year in which al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn were born, years before either of them could have comprehended the subtlety of the debate.

The symbolic thread in the accounts of al-Amīn is woven intricately around nearly all possible junctures in the ordinary narrative of his life. As shown above, one often has to study these meanings in an interactive framework that constantly refers to pertinent moments from the times of the Sasanids, Rashidūn, and Umayyads. The connections among these eras, however, are not a random shuffling of earlier images, but are organized in a logic guided

⁸⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 759–60; Abū'l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Raḥman b. Ishāq al-Zajjājī, *Majālis al-'Ulamā'*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (Kuwait, 1962), 35–36. Translation based on Williams, *Abbāsī Empire*, II, 312–13 and Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 328–29.

⁸¹ Additional attempts to evoke a linkage with the story of 'Uthmān can be found in the poetry addressed to al-Amīn. (see n. 8 above).

⁸² The presence of Kisā'ī in this prophesying story is significant, for he is also present in another hagiographic anecdote connected with the civil war, when Zubayda informs him of her horrible dream about al-Amīn, and urges him to devote extra attention to raising her son.

⁸³ See the story of "Hārūn's Premonition of the Civil War," and the test by Kisā'ī.

⁸⁴ al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-Nihāya fi Tabāqat al-Qurrā'*, ed. G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl (Leipzig, 1935), II, 307; I. Lichtenstädter, "al-Mufaḍḍal b. Muḥammad al-Ḍabbī," *EI*, VII, 305; Bosworth, *HT*, XXX, 328.

by ideas about the irony of destiny, and the corrective process of history. From the reign of 'Uthmān, to al-Walīd, to al-Amīn, there is a process of confirmation, reversal, and transposition of imagery that change in an ironic way. The scholar al-Zuhrī, cited above as the person who tells Hishām of the ill-fortune of al-Walīd, causes the latter tremendous aggravation. Al-Walīd in that ominous narrative of entertainment cited above, tells his companion that if al-Zuhrī were still alive, he would have killed him. By the time of al-Amīn, al-Zuhrī becomes the name of the horse of the caliph, and according to one version, the caliph does kill that horse before boarding the escape boat that Harthama had prepared,⁸⁵ and the horse continues to harbor the premonition of a coming death, and tries to alert the caliph, but to no avail. Conversely, al-Sindī, who was the horse of al-Walīd,⁸⁶ becomes a central advisor in that circle of incompetent officials who advised al-Amīn in his last days and led to his demise.

Both the dramatic overlaying on the narratives and the controversial nature of testimonies contribute to making the task of disentangling historical truth all the more challenging. What constantly strengthens a skeptical approach regarding the key portions of the text are the thematic motifs that repeatedly come up to serve a particular literary and moralizing function in the wider picture of the 'Abbāsīd narrative. When al-Amīn places his innocent trust in his servant during confinement and tells him, "You are not my *mawlā*. You are my brother and one of my own family," the line actually does more than serve to describe al-Amīn's relief. Innocently trustful in the loyalty of his companion, al-Amīn was communicating the narrator's ironic view on the responsibility of the caliph's brother (al-Ma'mūn/Ibn Sallām) for the eventual murder. And later in the narrative we again encounter a narrator's style weaving religious, literary, and historical threads together. When the caliph, during the duel with the assassins, picks up a cushion to defend himself against his assassin, we are reminded of the time when al-Amīn, as a child, was made to stand on a cushion (*wisāda*) while the leading figures of the 'Abbāsīd state pledged their allegiance (*bay'a*) to his succession.⁸⁷ The cushion, which elevated al-Amīn to power, and in general symbolized the comfort of imperial power, appears at the end as a fragile form of defense thereby metaphorically showing the fragility of political identity in providing one with a means of defense;⁸⁸ all this the while the power of religion is suspended as symbolized

⁸⁵ *Murūj*, IV, 293. ⁸⁶ Ṭabarī, II, 1799.

⁸⁷ On the occasion of al-Amīn's succession, Ya'qūbī states, "Hārūn commanded that his son Muḥammad [al-Amīn] be offered the *bay'a* in AH 175 when Muḥammad was then only five years old. To complete the matter the caliph distributed enormous sums of money among the populace. He then brought out Muḥammad seated on a cushion (*wisāda*) for public view, and declared his gratefulness to God and praised the Prophet. 'Abd al-Ṣamad b. 'Alī then stood, and made a speech in which he said, 'O you people, do not be distracted by [al-Amīn's] tender age, for this is indeed a well established blessed family. Its roots are firm in the earth, and its branches stretch into the heaven' (*fa-innahā al-shajaratu l-mubārakatu, aṣluhā thābitun wa far'uhā fī al-samā'*); Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 408).

⁸⁸ Other historical traditions also make use of the cushion as a motif in political discussions. The

by the rolled prayer mats located in the corner of the room in which al-Amīn is murdered.

Referential markers such as these keep cropping up in the regicide narrative, suggesting literary lineages and historical linkages that make the possibility of descriptive truth all the more remote. Why is it, for instance, that of all his officials, al-Amīn comes face to face with *ṣāhib al-maẓālīm* (the official in charge of public grievances) in prison, if not that a narrator wanted to highlight the atmosphere of injustice shrouding the episode of downfall? And why is it that the episode of “al-Amīn by the River” is set paradoxically at al-Khuld (“eternity”) palace located on al-Ṣarāt channel if not for the fact that there is a contrast between eternity and imminent end, and al-Ṣarāt and the image of a passage towards judgment? The caliph’s exit at the Khurāsān Gate, and his recognition of Ibn Sallām from the old days at Raqqa, are intended to evoke tragic meanings that connect with the lives of al-Rashīd and al-Ma’mūn. And could it be that the very act of being thrown in the river is an appropriation of an ancient motif that symbolized the washing away of sins?⁸⁹ Rhetorical elements are drawn, it seems, from diverse sources to extend the dramatic poignancy of the narrative.

One particularly well-tailored allusive picture that summarizes how the texts have to be read in dialogue with the past can be found in the scene of al-Amīn’s departure from Baghdad. We have already encountered that exit scene as part of the overall narrative of downfall. However, a close portrayal of that moment, narrated by al-Ḥasan b. Abī Sa’īd on the authority of Ṭāriq al-khādim, says that just before al-Amīn abandoned the Round City, he halted at the desolate sentry post at the Baṣra Gate. There, just before leaving, al-Amīn reportedly asked to drink from the guards’ well. But when he was handed a cup of that water, it emanated such a foul odor that he had to turn it away.⁹⁰ Far from being a description of fact, this story seems to harp on a constructed political motif. As he was now about to describe al-Amīn on the verge of monarchal downfall, the chronicler sought to allude to the caliph’s divestment from kingship in symbolic terms. The denial of the caliph of a mere drink of water is a signal of the imminent end of his political rule and life. But, to appreciate the grounding of this meaning of the account, we should here leaf back in Ṭabari’s chronicle to the annals of al-Rashīd’s reign,

anonymous chronicler of *Akhbār al-Dawla al-‘Abbāsiyya* recounts a story that describes the Prophet’s consolation of ‘Alī that he shall not rule the community for long. The account states that ‘Alī was once heard saying: “al-‘Abbās visited the Messenger of God once, while I was with him at the house of Umm Salama. The Prophet was leaning on a cushion filled with fiber which he then tossed to al-‘Abbās telling him, ‘here, sit on this,’ and then commenced to whisper to him something which I could not make out. Then [al-‘Abbās] rose and left, and when he became at a distance, [the Prophet] told me, ‘Do not be grieved by what shall happen, for truly you will only have minor share in the matter. Leadership shall pass to this and his progeny. It shall come to them without them exerting effort, and will put them in a position to avenge your tragedies and punish those who oppressed you” (*Akhbār al-Dawla al-‘Abbāsiyya*, ed. A. A. Dūrī and ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Muṭṭalibī [Beirut, 1971], 187).

⁸⁹ G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore, 1985), 232. ⁹⁰ Ṭabari, III, 917.

and reexamine the anecdote where the caliph is depicted conversing with the ascetic Ibn al-Sammāk. In that story, as we saw in chapter 2, the ascetic questions the caliph about how much he would be willing to give up in exchange for a drink of water if he is in the throes of thirst. At the time when the caliph said that he would be willing to give up all his kingdom, the ascetic said, “A kingdom whose value is only a drink of water isn’t, indeed, worth aspiring to [or: contending over, *allā yunāfasa fīhī*]!” Hearing that, Hārūn wept, while al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ gestured to Ibn al-Sammāk to depart.

If we juxtapose the two accounts, of al-Amīn and al-Rashīd, we can see that the story of al-Amīn’s thirst before his downfall responds to the moral embedded in the story from al-Rashīd’s reign. Al-Rashīd’s weeping may be interpreted as a sign of religious awakening and his recognition of the ephemeral nature of his power, but it can also be connected with the accounts of his alleged fear of an approaching civil war between his sons (see the story “Harun’s Premonition of the Civil War,” above). Ibn al-Sammāk’s address to al-Rashīd about the worthlessness of contention over kingship only makes sense in light of the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn. That al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, who became the vizir of al-Amīn and the alleged architect of the war against al-Ma’mūn, is not only present in the plot, but is the one who gestures Ibn al-Sammāk to leave, also highlights a political implication regarding al-Faḍl that a reader realizes more fully when he reads about al-Faḍl’s encouragement for al-Amīn to betray the succession agreement and challenge his brother. Al-Rashīd had wept before, when he discussed his premonitions with Kisāʿī, but with Ibn al-Sammāk the caliph wept again not just for the profundity of the remarks but because he is reminded again of the coming fate of al-Amīn, who will indeed be the one denied that drink of water that Ibn al-Sammāk had once merely hypothesized.

Water, the implication in these stories runs, symbolizes imperial authority, and one is left wondering about the value of rivalry over political power.⁹¹ Control of the dominion is made to appear as essential to the lives of al-Rashīd and al-Amīn as water is to their survival. But whereas al-Rashīd is “awakened” to this reality in peacetime, al-Amīn is not, and thus ends up forced to experience the loss of the kingdom in order to grasp the lesson.⁹² The general use of the water motif in the narratives of al-Amīn can be found connecting with the narratives of earlier leaders, who suffered thirst before their downfall. We may find a positive elucidation of the significance of this motif

⁹¹ The message of Ibn al-Sammāk is reminiscent of the view of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. When the Byzantine emperor once sent a bottle to the caliph in Medina, asking him to “fill this bottle for me with everything,” the caliph, Ṭabarī reports, filled it with water and wrote, “Verily this is everything provided by this world” (Ṭabarī, I, 2822; Humphreys, *HT*, XV, 27).

⁹² Ṭāhir, or the chronicler, may be referring to this story about al-Amīn when he writes in a letter addressed to al-Ma’mūn, announcing victory, stating: “I have previously written to the Commander of the Faithful about...how I disliked what Harthama proceeded to do on his own initiative regarding him [i.e., al-Amīn] after God had exhausted him and cut off his hope concerning every stratagem or support...and after he had been prevented from reaching the water, let alone other things” (Ṭabarī, III, 927; translation in Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 198). For another report in Ṭabarī that also hammers the point that al-Amīn died thirsty, see Ṭabarī, III, 908.

in a speech that the caliph 'Uthmān made after his accession. There, 'Uthmān advises the community on the need to cast aside worldly matters in favor of looking to the afterlife, and concludes his sermon by citing the Qur'ānic verse that reads, "And set for them the similitude of the life of this world: it is as water that We send down out of heaven, and the plants of the earth mingle with it; and in the morning it is straw the winds scatter, and God is omnipotent over everything."⁹³ It was after 'Uthmān finished reading this verse, Ṭabarī states, that Muslims then stepped forward and offered him the *bay'ā*. The story of 'Uthmān's murder is itself imbued with the tragic irony of the water motif, since he himself was denied water before his death.⁹⁴ In the case of al-Amīn, however, the specific dramatic depiction of the caliph standing just outside his deserted palace and failing to acquire a drink of water amid the ruins of Baghdad is specifically inspired by the Qur'ānic image which describes a similar scene of gloom surrounding the scene of an abandoned palace with a nearby well of stagnant water: "How many a city We have destroyed in its evildoing, and how it is fallen down upon its roofs. How many a ruined well and a lofty palace (*wa bi'rīn mu'attalatīn wa qaṣrīn mashīd*)."⁹⁵

⁹³ Qur'ān 18:45, partly drawing on the translation in Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, I, 321. The Arabic of the Qur'ānic verse reads "*wa idrib lahum mathala l-hayāti al-dunyā ka-mā'in anzalnāhu minā al-samā' fa ikhtalata bihi nabātu l-ardī fa-aṣḥaba hashīman tadrūhu al-riyāḥ wa kāna allāhu 'alā kulli shay'in muqtadirā*." After the *bay'ā* was offered to him, 'Uthmān reportedly addressed the congregation, and after praising God, said: "Verily you are in a transitory abode and in the flower of life, so set forth until the time appointed for your death and aim for the best which you can attain, for you may be met [by your end] morning or evening. Surely this world harbors deceit, 'so let not the present life delude you,' and 'let not the deceitful one delude you concerning God' [Qur'ān, 31:33; 35:5]. Consider those who have gone before you, then be in earnest and do not be neglectful, for you will surely not be overlooked. Where are the sons and brothers of this world, who tilled it, dwelt in it, and were long granted enjoyment therein (*i'tabirū bi-man maḍā thumma jiddū wa lā taghfalū fa-innahu lā yughfalu 'ankum. Ayna abnā' al-dunyā wa ikhwānuhā alladhīna athārūhā wa amarihā wa mutti'ū bihā ṭawīlan, alam talfizhum*)? Cast aside this world as God has cast it aside and seek the hereafter, for verily God has coined a parable for it and for that which is better. The Almighty has said: 'And set for them the similitude of the life of this world: it is as water that We send down out of heaven, and the plants of the earth mingle with it; and in the morning it is straw the winds scatter; and God is omnipotent over everything.'" The translation, except for the Qur'ānic verse, is in Humphreys, *HT*, XV, 3-4. 'Uthmān's reference to the vanished power of "*abnā' al-dawla wa ikhwānuhā*" presupposed an audience that would have been familiar with these terms most in the early 'Abbāsīd period, and witnessed the downfall of the Abnā' in the civil war. See Ṭabarī, I, 2800-01. ⁹⁴ Ṭabarī, II, 3269.

⁹⁵ Qur'ān 22:45 (partly drawing on the translation in Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, II, 45). Also, note al-Manṣūr's weaving of the vocabulary of this verse into one of his speeches, where he cautions of the fate of those abandoning the pious path. Al-Manṣūr states, "For we have written in the Psalms, after the [invocations] the earth shall be the inheritance of My servants, the righteous (*wa laqad katbnā fī l-zabūr min ba'd al-dhikr anna l-ardā yarithuhā 'ibādīya al-ṣāliḥīn*). O matter irrevocable! O word of Justice! O judgement rendered! Now praise be to God who has afforded us His proofs and may a misdoing folk be far! Those who have taken the Ka'ba as a place to parade themselves . . . and made the Qur'an into sects: what they made light of has encompassed them. How many a neglected well have you seen, how many a lofty fortress (*fa-kam tarā min bi'rīn mu'attalatīn wa qaṣrīn mashīd*); whose owners God left alone until they had changed their tradition (*hattā baddalū al-sunna*) and oppressed their kinsmen (*wa idṭahadū l-ṭira*), and deviated and opposed and acted arrogantly?" (Ṭabarī, III, 429; Williams, *'Abbāsī Empire*, II, 33). Al-Manṣūr's cautionary statements stand like a hypothetical paradigm awaiting fulfillment, and the story of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn fulfills the prophecy.

The overlaying of the account with this redemptive tinge, and the existence of an ambiguous attitude toward al-Ma'mūn, illustrates the complexity of the narrative's purpose. The range of meanings of al-Amīn's death vary according to how observers assessed his reign. However, the winding path of downfall of al-Amīn, together with the divergent postures that he assumes along the way, can also be viewed as a unified line of representation. The contradictory messages that sometimes surround the process of depiction are not always the result of specifically different opinions as preserved in distinct reports, but can constitute a cohesive message on their own, regarding human behavior and its variability in response to changing conditions. Change, in turn, is shown leading to sudden shifts in moral positions, thus complicating and challenging any fixed categorizations of righteousness. In the end, the ultimate goal of the narrators was not to prove or disprove al-Ma'mūn's charges, but to lay out a particular scheme of a political drama centered on actors whose identities are complicated as much by the legacy of the past as it is by the historical developments they live through. At the center of this story with various layers of crisis, al-Amīn becomes the focus of a central human and political tragedy where the actor's fall becomes his only salvation from the moral and political disorder generated in the pursuit of power.

Al-Ma'mūn: the heretic caliph

Like Hārūn al-Rashīd, the caliph al-Ma'mūn has been a familiar, popular figure in the modern period. Whereas the name of al-Rashīd has been associated with romance and mystery and decidedly placed in a mythical milieu, however, al-Ma'mūn's has been associated with learning and rational pursuits, and descriptions of his reign have generally echoed with a far more realistic ring. Al-Ma'mūn's name never escapes mention at the start of any study of medieval Islamic science and philosophy. For it was he who first commissioned the translation of the ancient classics, the works of Euclid, Ptolemy, Aristotle, Plato, and Hippocrates, and who founded the academy known as Bayt al-Ḥikma (house of wisdom), where scholars pored over inquiries ranging from medical study to measuring the circumference of the earth. 'Abbāsīd patronage of scientific efforts not only created a central institution housing the great works of various fields, but also turned the 'Abbāsīd court into a magnet for scholars who had previously worked in isolation.

The list of those indebted to al-Ma'mūn's patronage is long and varied. It includes such luminaries as the Bakhṭīshū' family, trusted physicians of the caliph; the Banū Mūsā b. Shākir, expert mathematicians and engineers; Ishāq b. Yūsuf al-Kindī, the renowned philosopher of the day; Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, the leading figure in the translation movement; al-'Abbās b. Sa'īd al-Jawharī who managed the astronomical observatory in Baghdad; and even astrologers, such as 'Umar b. al-Farkhān Abū Ḥaḥṣ al-Ṭabarī and 'Abdallāh b. Sahl b. Nawbakht, who advised the caliph of fortuitous moments for sensitive decisions. The caliph expressed a direct interest in all these fields, and kept watch over the progress of research on one occasion even berating a prominent scholar, al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā, for not having read the works of Euclid more thoroughly.¹ Among these fields, it was in the realm of philosophical inquiry and logic that the caliph seems to have shown his keenest interest. Frequently al-Ma'mūn personally presided over debates among scholars, leaving them to engage in discussion and intervening when dialogue threatened to give way to

¹ Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Yūsuf al-Qifṭī, *Kitāb Ikhbār al-'Ulamā' bi-Akhbār al-Ḥukamā'* (Beirut, n.d.), 288.

a brawl. No subject, from interfaith dialogues to disagreements on the definition of love, was deemed off-limits.² Nor did the caliph consider some settings more fitting for scientific inquiry than others. In 832, while visiting Egypt on a campaign to suppress a Coptic revolt, the caliph seized the opportunity to explore the Pyramids. Curious about their secrets, the caliph ordered the opening of the Great Pyramid. When it quickly became apparent, however, that this enterprise was achieving nothing beyond the draining of his treasury, he called for a halt of the excavation, but not before expressing admiration for the skill and wisdom of the ancients. In his expression of interest in the ancient Egyptians, one cannot but notice that this caliph was tempted by images of Pharaonic power, and behaved in that foreign land with a curiosity characteristic of a similar ambitious predecessor, Alexander the Great.

Adorned with this intellectual reputation and known for his patronage of scholars, al-Ma'mūn shines among the 'Abbāsids like a renaissance personality. The allure of his concern with truth and debate and of his association with philosophers, mathematicians, and physicians has been such that modern scholars tend to forget that al-Ma'mūn was a political leader; that despite his scholarly interests, he was first and foremost a Commander of the Faithful, who ran an empire and spent most of his time charting better methods of administrative centralization and foolproof plans for finishing off the Byzantine empire. And while he was composed in discussions and tolerant of diversity in opinions regarding scholarly matters, al-Ma'mūn was impatient with different political viewpoints, and struck ruthlessly against those who dared to challenge his political authority. Hārūn al-Rashīd may have been the caliph who had a habit of calling out "*al-sayf wa'l-naṭi'*," but it is really al-Ma'mūn who more often made good on these threats.

The first layer of orthodox antagonism toward the caliph: the *miḥna*

Interestingly, most of the issues that have made al-Ma'mūn such a popular figure in modern times, his learnedness and patronage of scholars, seem fringe considerations in the medieval chroniclers' representations of this caliph. To medieval scholars peering into the early ninth century from the secure ram-parts of the orthodoxy of later times, al-Ma'mūn's name reminded them first of his controversial religious policies, which advocated the views of the Mu'tazila school of speculative theology. The troublesome episode of the *miḥna*, which he initiated toward the end of his reign, was conceived and implemented under his direction.

Although lasting a mere twelve years, and rarely involving physical harm, the *miḥna* left an enduring and bitter attitude in orthodox scholars toward the Mu'tazilī school of speculative theology, toward philosophical inquiry in general, and toward state attempts to meddle in religious interpretation. Our

² Khaṭīb, VII, 147.

information on the conduct of the *miḥna* remains sparse. Most of the extant evidence remains confined to the condition in the western provinces (Egypt, Syria, Irāq, and Ḥijāz). The accounts, however, adequately demonstrate that the 'Abbāsīd state zealously pursued this program in various cities, and forcibly pressured the 'ulamā' to accept the Createdness creed. Those who resisted faced a myriad of official reprisals. To begin with, the state, represented by its governors, barred the dissenters from holding official positions related to the judiciary, such as judges or witness certifiers (*muzakkīs*), and their testimony was rejected in court.³ As the *miḥna* intensified, we are told, those who still refused to concede to the *miḥna* were forbidden to teach or pray in mosques.⁴ In 846 (AH 231) the caliphate went further in its persecution when, on the occasion of an exchange of prisoners with the Byzantines in Asia Minor, it placed an official who questioned the Muslim captives before their release on the issue of the Createdness, agreeing to release them only if they conceded to the creed.⁵ In legal terms, rejecting the creed had the effect of barring the relatives of a deceased person from inheriting his property,⁶ while in Egypt, a judge was able to help a woman obtain a divorce from her husband on the grounds that her husband opposed the creed.⁷ Most of this persecution occurred in the form of social pressure, but it all signified an unequivocal statement that opponents of the creed were being excommunicated, a religious threat that could not be taken lightly coming from a caliphate that postured as the holder of the Prophetic legacy. The *miḥna* was the caliphate's most daring attempt to expand this symbolic religious leadership into a structured religious leadership that functioned as interpreters of Islamic law.⁸

The chronological record of the early 'Abbāsīds places the worst days of the *miḥna*, as well as the bulk of its years, in the reigns of al-Ma'mūn's successors, al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq. Despite this, however, al-Ma'mūn seems to receive the brunt of the orthodox backlash, for it was he who initiated the program of 'Abbāsīd support for the *miḥna*, and it was in his reign that the first confrontation between the caliph and the future hero of orthodoxy, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, was scheduled. There were further reasons to inflame this hostility. Besides insisting on the Createdness creed, al-Ma'mūn, unlike other caliphs, made various legal and intellectual propositions that challenged the authority of orthodoxy. Among his more daring religious ideas were the idea of legalizing *mut'a* (the institution of temporary marriage) and the introduction of additional *takbīrs* in prayer. Each of these issues indicated the caliph's desire to put forward his pretensions of juridical power. The *mut'a* issue marked the caliph's attempt to pronounce a new law in the sphere of personal

³ Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Kindī, *Kitāb al-Wulāt wa Kitāb al-Qudāt*, trans. as *The Governors and Judges of Egypt*, ed. R. Guest, Gibb Memorial Series 19 (Leiden and London, 1912), 447.

⁴ Kindī, *al-Wulāt wa'l-Qudāt*, 452. ⁵ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 482; Ṭabarī, III, 1353.

⁶ Abū Nu'aym, *Akhbār Ishbahān*, II, 160.

⁷ Muḥammad b. Khalaf b. Ḥayyān Wakī', *Akhbār al-Qudāt*, ed. A. M. Marāghī, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1947–50), III, 290. ⁸ For an outline of the *miḥna*, see M. Hinds, "Miḥna," *EI*, VII, 2–6.

status, historically a matter decided by religious law, while the *takbīr* revealed the caliph's wish to modify the shape of a religious ritual.

The confrontation precipitated by the *miḥna* and by al-Ma'mūn's other religious policies profoundly skewed the 'ulamā's views of al-Ma'mūn and of each other. After the lifting of the *miḥna* in AH 232, a new generation of 'ulamā' emerged, which defined its solidarity on the basis of a shared past of resistance to the *miḥna*. Those who had wavered in resisting the state or who had gone along with the Mu'tazili views were stigmatized as unreliable religious scholars. It no longer mattered what the knowledge of an individual scholar was, or whom he studied under, as much as what position he had adopted during the *miḥna*.⁹ Biographical dictionaries of the 'ulamā' clearly underscore the importance of this experience. A crucial line in these entries often tells us of the position that any particular scholar took on the *miḥna*, and the results are somewhat predictable. Those who defied the *miḥna* or at least vehemently protested before conceding to pressure are usually depicted as more reliable authorities. Yaḥyā b. Ma'īn, one of the leading orthodox scholars, made it his business to publicize the attitude of various scholars toward the *miḥna*. The caliphate's effort to distinguish its loyalists from its opponents during the *miḥna* became the 'ulamā's method for circumscribing the formal political outline of their religious thought, and a test for distinguishing orthodox scholars from others.

But it was al-Ma'mūn who became the first person to have his character reassessed in light of the episode of the *miḥna*. Writing centuries later, orthodox scholars could scarcely avoid drawing a connection between the shaping of al-Ma'mūn's life and his pursuit of the *miḥna*, or hide their view that the sudden death of the caliph in 833 symbolized divine retribution. The fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Kathīr, describing the journey of Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Nuḥ to confront the caliph on the *miḥna*, says: "[Al-Ma'mūn] was led to die (*ahlakahu allāh*) before their arrival. Verily God had answered the prayers of his servant and chosen imam Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal], and spared him the sight of al-Ma'mūn."¹⁰ Dhahabī also establishes the same connection, saying, "On the issue of [the Createdness of] the Qur'an, [al-Ma'mūn] refused to compromise, and insisted on putting the 'ulamā' on trial in AH 218 and heightened his pressure on them. So God brought his end (*fa-akhadhahu allāh*)."¹¹ The scholar Kutubī declares: "The caliph insisted on the issue of the Qur'an . . . Thus his end came swiftly (*fa-ʿūjila wa lam yumhal*)."¹²

⁹ Nu'aym b. Hammād al-Marwazī, for example, was not particularly noted either for his religious erudition or his accuracy in reporting. Various scholars criticize him for compiling a dubious collection of lore in the genre of *al-Malāḥim* and *al-Fitan* (eschatology traditions). Notwithstanding these shortcomings, orthodox scholars seem to remember him fondly for having taken a firm stand against the *miḥna*, and consider other ḥadīths that he reported, dealing with the controversies of the *miḥna*, to have been authentic. To bolster Nu'aym's image, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself is shown endorsing the reputation of this controversial ḥadīth scholar. (*Sīyar*, X, 595–612).

¹⁰ 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1932–39), I, 274. ¹¹ *Sīyar*, X, 283. ¹² Kutubī, *Fawā'id al-Wafayāt*, II, 238.

The second layer of orthodox hostility: the civil war

The *miḥna* represented a very direct and clear battle between the caliph and the 'ulamā', but the roots of their hostility stretched farther back to the beginning of al-Ma'mūn's reign, where they centered on a political issue, namely the context of his rise to power. That the caliph acceded to the throne not through hereditary succession but through a conflict that split the community presented a moral and religious problem. In the public view, far-reaching political changes such as the overthrow of a dynasty or an internal succession crisis rose above the character of temporal political events, signaling a more fundamental turn in the natural order that could only be accommodated in the public understanding through a commensurate religious explanation – something the 'ulamā' were both unable and unwilling to provide at such short notice. The tacit sympathy of the orthodox for the incumbent caliph was not so much a reflection of a long-standing historic solidarity between the 'ulamā' and the 'Abbāsīd caliphate as it was a reflection of their unwillingness to accept the transition to al-Ma'mūn's regime, and his violation of the status quo. Over the course of a half-century, the 'Abbāsīds had succeeded in turning their government into a focal Islamic institution for leadership, as much a rallying point for religious solidarity as it was one for loyalty to the revolution. However imperfect 'Abbāsīd claims to caliphal legitimacy were, their success created stable boundaries for Islamic society, which made the new caliphate personify Islam's political and social interests. Any challenge to caliphal authority therefore had come to be viewed as a threat to the social and cultural unity of the new community. Against this background, al-Ma'mūn's conflict with the caliph could not but be viewed as a cause for instability and political danger. Al-Ma'mūn's rise to power was in essence the first case of al-Māwardī's "*imārat al-istīlā*" (emirate by seizure).

The other element that alarmed the 'ulamā' about al-Ma'mūn's rise in this early stage was the fact that his movement had originated in Khurāsān. Over the course of the half-century between the reigns of al-Saffāḥ and al-Rashīd, Khurāsān had represented a source of considerable political and religious threat toward the caliphate. Despite the fact that the 'Abbāsīd revolution had emerged from Khurāsān, the east remained in the early 'Abbāsīd period a source of religious and political fear in the central Islamic lands. The variety of syncretistic revolts that emerged in the east after the fall of Abū Muslim showed the fragility of the Arab military presence there, as well as the malleability of the Islamic message under the influence of Khurāsānī millenarianism in the post-revolutionary period. Rebels such as Bihafarid, Sunbādh, Muqanna', and Ustādhīs put forward prophetic and/or political claims as they commanded popular support for the Khurāsānī struggle against the caliphal center.¹³ These movements must have spelled sheer terror in other

¹³ Basic surveys of these revolts can be found in: G. H. Sadighi, *Les Mouvements religieux iraniens au IIe et au IIIe siècles de l'hégire* (Paris, 1938); Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*; Daniel, *Political and Social History*.

corners of the caliphate. From their secure religious bases in Mecca, Medina, Kūfa, Baṣra, Damascus, and even Baghdad, the *‘ulamā’* anxiously observed the caliphate engaging the Khurāsānī rebels in a fight that had narrow odds for Baghdad. The severity and frequency of the heterodox revolts that followed Abū Muslim’s death highlighted the risks involved in an Islamic movement that originated in the east. It was not everyday that the *‘ulamā’* could gamble that a revolution such as that of the ‘Abbāsids in 750 would eventually benefit the Islamic faith.¹⁴ On the eve of the succession crisis, the religious future of Khurāsān, despite a significant Islamic presence there, was still uncertain, and the ḥadīth parties could scarcely trust that the side-effects of a political conflict would work in their favor.

Against this background of revolt and in light of al-Ma’mūn’s familial connection with one of those rebels, it was difficult to resist the impression that al-Ma’mūn’s movement was another such religious menace from Khurāsān. The succession crisis, charges about the impiety of al-Amīn, and the ‘Abbāsīd mismanagement of Khurāsān, the *‘ulamā’* believed, seemed no more than a fig leaf for a religious movement bent on dominating Islam in the central lands. The thinness of the Islamic veneer on al-Ma’mūn’s movement could be noticed from the composition of his social support. The Sahlid vizirs converted to Islam in 805 (AH 190), allegedly at the behest of al-Ma’mūn, at a moment when it was becoming clear that they were going to be entrusted to advise al-Ma’mūn in Khurāsān, a province reeling from the centralist ‘Abbāsīd policies and on the verge of following any provincial rebel willing to defend its local interests. Frequently referred to as skilled astrologers, the Sahlids are portrayed as ambitious ministers who were solely concerned with acquiring power. Nowhere do the Islamic texts attribute to them any religious or aphoristic statements, as they do the Barmakids, Ya’qūb b. Dāwūd b. Ṭahmān, or other worthy ministers. And the situation is equally problematic with others. Hishām b. Farrkhusraw, whose family supplied some of the key commanders in al-Ma’mūn’s army during the civil war, was accused of heresy in Hārūn’s reign, while a slew of Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn’s lieutenants whose actions are traced throughout the civil war are usually portrayed as opportunists with few religious scruples.¹⁵

Whether the religious fears of Khurāsān were justified cannot be proven, but this orthodox perception no doubt formed the essence of the hostility toward al-Ma’mūn in the western provinces. When Yahyā b. ‘Āmir, a member of the ‘Abbāsīd old guard, traveled from Baghdad to Khurāsān in 814 to examine al-Ma’mūn’s situation firsthand, his only comment on observing the caliph surrounded by his new circle of supporters was to tell the caliph, “You are nothing but the Commander of the infidels!” a statement for which, not surprisingly, he was quickly put to death.¹⁶

¹⁴ Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 77.

¹⁵ See Jahshiyārī, 315 on Hārūn b. Nu’aym and al-Rustamī.

¹⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1001; Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 450; *al-Kāmil*, VI, 320. Another version says that the

This view of the caliph as a heretic or leader of a non-Islamic movement remains both rare and extreme. More frequently the image we glean from the sources is one of al-Ma'mūn as a helpless and inexperienced young prince who found himself stranded in Khurāsān upon the death of his father there, and who was forced to rely completely on his new advisors. Constrained by those conditions, al-Ma'mūn is said to have borne no responsibility for many of the controversial decisions made in his name, such as the waging of war, the execution of Harthama b. A'yan, and the nomination of 'Alī al-Riḍā for succession. It was al-Faḍl b. Sahl, his vizir, who allegedly drummed up support for the war and who later conceived the idea of nominating the 'Alid *imām* for succession as a stepping stone to the eventual transfer of power from the 'Abbāsids to the former Sasanian dynasty.¹⁷ Back in Baghdad, members of the 'Abbāsīd family could not believe that an 'Abbāsīd in his sound mind would move to alter the line of succession from his family to the 'Alid branch. Al-Ma'mūn, they therefore publicized, must have fallen under a magical spell administered by his wicked vizir, who had confined the young prince to a palace and taken personal charge of all political affairs in the name of al-Ma'mūn.¹⁸ This fear of al-Ma'mūn's political concession to the Khurāsānī leaders was compounded by a growing religious fear that al-Ma'mūn's creation of a new political center on the frontier and his manifest dependence on a new Khurāsānī entourage might even entail some sacrifices of Islamic beliefs.¹⁹

The portrayals of al-Ma'mūn: the caliph's self-representation

Recognizing the troubling memory of previous Khurāsānī rebellions, al-Ma'mūn, or his vizir, took great pains to emphasize the Islamic character of

statement addressed to the caliph was, "You are but the king of the Magians," and adds that Yahyā was crucified for this (Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* [Beirut, 1967], 488). Jahshiyārī (p. 318) says that it was Muḥammad b. Sa'īd b. 'Āmir, a lieutenant of Harthama, who addressed the caliph, calling him "commander of the hypocrites."

¹⁷ Jahshiyārī, 313.

¹⁸ *Al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 353; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārīb*, 441; Ṭabarī, III, 1025–26. The expression used by the 'Abbāsīd family in Baghdad to describe the new caliph is that he was *mashūr majnūn* (Ṭabarī, III, 1025). The adjective *majnūn* is chosen no doubt to provide a rhyming variation on the caliph's title, "Ma'mūn."

¹⁹ Some time during his rule from Marw, for example, al-Ma'mūn commanded, reportedly at the behest of al-Faḍl b. Sahl, that a fire burner (*kanūn*), which was found in Khurāsān and attributed to the last Sasanian monarch Yazdigard, be placed inside the Ka'ba, where incense would be burnt on it day and night. This order stirred the suspicion of ḥadīth scholars who feared an attempt at turning Muslim places of worship into Zoroastrian fire temples. The 'ulamā' (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*) under the leadership of Yazīd b. Hārūn vehemently objected to the idea, which al-Ma'mūn then retracted; see al-Qāḍī al-Rashīd, *Kitāb al-Dhakhā'ir*, 183–84. Another report states that al-Ma'mūn ordered his secretary Aḥmad b. Yūsuf to write to various regions (*al-nawahī*) to expand the use of lanterns (*qanādīl*) in mosques during the month of Ramaḍān. In this case, the story focuses on Ibn Yūsuf's skill in writing a letter to the provinces justifying the action in terms of its utility and benefit for evening worshippers, and shows that the move was accepted. (Muḥammad b. Yahyā al-Šūfī, *al-Awrāq, Ash'ar Awlād al-Khulafā'*, ed. H. Dunne, 3 vols., [Beirut, 1982], I, 231. Earlier, the Barmakids were under suspicion after having placed incense burners in the Ka'ba (Jahshiyārī, 254).

his conflict with the caliph. Toward this end, Ma'mūnid propaganda emphasized that the war was neither an attack on the 'Abbāsīd caliphate nor a repudiation of the achievements of the revolution. Rather, they claimed, it was an Islamic reformist movement, which sought only to restore the ideals of the original movement, now forsaken by the incumbent in Baghdad. Al-Amīn had abandoned the pious ways of Hārūn, giving himself over to personal whim and rampant ambition. He would stop at no limit, even if it meant breaking binding oaths taken in Mecca and divesting al-Ma'mūn (symbolically Khurāsān) of his established rights under the laws of religion and morality. If left unchallenged, al-Amīn, the Ma'mūnid view implied, would have brought ruin (*fasād*) on the populace and the kingdom by his offensive policies (*baghy*) and flagrant treachery (*nakth*, *ghadr*, and *makr*). The security of the faith was put in jeopardy as political power used its religiously and politically advantageous position to suspend time-honored moral and religious precepts.

Given such a situation, a reformist movement was not only inevitable, but was a religious duty. At the center of this movement, the pretender cast himself in pietistic terms as a traditional leader, and drew on various means – appearances, titles, and political language – to formulate this flattering official image. Whereas al-Amīn was associated with the negative attributes aforementioned, al-Ma'mūn stood as the paragon of loyalty in religious, political, and social terms. The faithful son of Hārūn, Ma'mūn was holding fast to the duty of submission (*tā'ū*), keeping faith with covenants and the memory of the righteous predecessor rulers. It was as if al-Ma'mūn's historical personality had benefited from the troubling lessons of earlier civil wars and 'Abbāsīd quarrels, making him hesitant to demand justice even as the situation demanded immediate change. Al-Ma'mūn would patiently endure the aggravation of his brother, his brother's ministers, and the corrupt government of Baghdad to protect the community and the state from the threat of war – until this was no longer tenable.

The beginning of al-Ma'mūn's pietistic program can be dated to the year 811 (AH 196), when the caliph first adopted the politically loaded title "*imām al-hudā*" ("the guide to righteousness")²⁰ and declared his commitment to establishing righteous government. The popular call for *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l nahy 'an al-munkar* ("the call for instituting virtue and preventing vice"), which in previous years had formed a key aspect of the pietistic language of the Islamic opposition to the 'Abbāsīds, now became part of al-Ma'mūn's political discourse. Next, al-Ma'mūn moved to demonstrate his pietism by adopting an austere lifestyle and ordering the enforcement of traditional religious penalties (*hudūd*).

To illustrate his vigorousness in pursuing the traditionalist program, the sources tell us, al-Ma'mūn declared a strict prohibition on wine drinking in his region, and reimposed the traditional penalty of flogging for violators. Aside from its religious significance, this measure served as a tool in the propaganda

²⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 796.

against al-Amīn, who was accused at this time of frivolity and of failing to punish non-Islamic practices in his domain.²¹ From Khurāsān a stream of rumors flowed to various provinces, declaring that illicit poetry centering on themes of wine love and various forms of debauchery, such as the *Khamriyyāt* of Abū Nuwās, were being composed and recited under the caliph's patronage in Baghdad. All the while, al-Ma'mūn devoted himself to the causes of justice (*al-'adl*) and righteousness (*al-ḥaqq*). And the more the conflict escalated, the more al-Ma'mūn's pattern of self-idealization turned into a systematic campaign bent on defaming al-Amīn's personal character. Hence we are told that al-Ma'mūn eventually ordered the composition of official announcements that spoke of al-Amīn's faults and advertised these allegations from the pulpits of the mosques of Khurāsān during the Friday prayers.²² With this polarized imagery of the brothers, the sources explain, it was little wonder that the sympathy of the populace in places as far apart as Samarqand and Yemen gravitated to al-Ma'mūn, leading them to join the war against the caliph.²³

What religious scholars thought of al-Ma'mūn's Islamic propaganda the chroniclers do not say, but al-Ma'mūn's religious criticisms of al-Amīn's rule no doubt put the *'ulamā'* in an awkward position, forcing them to reassess the possibility of a greater role for religion in their definition of political leadership, its rights, and its responsibilities. With al-Ma'mūn we get the first qualitative shift in the 'Abbāsīd political argument: al-Ma'mūn's emphasis on pietism as a qualification for rule. This signaled a departure from the traditional 'Abbāsīd arguments for their caliphal legitimacy. In theory, the religious scholars had probably envisaged the relevance of a pietistic argument for political legitimacy, but al-Ma'mūn's crusade made it all a question of who was going to speak for Islam: the caliph or the *'ulamā'*.

Al-Ma'mūn's rapid victory over al-Amīn quickly resolved theoretical discussions of caliphal legitimacy. The *'ulamā'* could do little but accede to the official view that al-Amīn's defeat was an indication of his impiety, while the new caliph, building on the favorable outcome of the war, declared himself "Commander of the Faithful," and proceeded to commemorate his victory on 'Abbāsīd coinage. Dirhams struck in AH 198 in the eastern provinces bore the new title of al-Ma'mūn, and in the margin of the obverse, a Qur'ānic verse was added that read: "God's is the imperative first and last. And on that day the believers will rejoice, in the victory granted by God."²⁴ Al-Ma'mūn's political

²¹ Jahshiyārī, 295.

²² Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. 'Alī al-Ḥuṣārī, *Zahr al-Adāb wa Thamar al-Albāb*, ed. A. M. al-Bijāwī, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1953), I, 413. Looking back from the tenth century, al-'Askarī considered the flourishing of the poems on wine love to be the critical blow which put the caliph into disrepute and undermined his legitimacy (Abū Hilāl al-Ḥasan b. 'Abdallāh b. Sahl al-'Askarī, *al-Awā'il*, ed. M. al-Maṣrī et al., 2 vols. [Damascus, 1975], I, 379–80).

²³ Ṭabarī, III, 864; *al-Kāmil*, VI, 267.

²⁴ The statement is an excerpt from the verse: "The Romans have been conquered, in the nearest part of the land; but after their defeat, they shall [in their turn] conquer in a few years. God's is the imperative first and last. And on that the believers will rejoice, in the victory granted by God. He grants victory to whom he chooses. He is the all-mighty, ever-merciful" (Qur'ān, 30:1–5).

intentions in choosing the new inscription were not merely to commemorate his victory, but to articulate a message binding worldly victory with divine favor. Just as the Qur'ānic verse prophesied the victory of the Romans over the Sasanians and stated that this Roman victory was predestined, so the caliph, after the civil war, sought to show that his victory in the civil war was "the victory granted by God," and predestined as well. Khurāsānī society was now playing out its providential role by becoming guardian of the Islamic message, much as the Arabs were in the context of the Byzantine–Sasanian world.

Still another step in this celebration of victory came the following year, when al-Ma'mūn sent treasures from frontier principalities in Transoxiana to the Ka'ba, including the crown of the king of Kābul.²⁵ In a letter accompanying these gifts, the new caliph announced that he had received these treasures from the king of Kābul as a sign of his submission and conversion to Islam. However, the statement is strangely embedded in a vehement denunciation of al-Amīn. That al-Ma'mūn chose to emphasize the righteousness of his victory over al-Amīn in a document addressed to the central Islamic lands shows the lingering embarrassment caused by the civil war, and the continuing need to elaborate apologetic arguments.²⁶

Al-Ma'mūn was no doubt conscious that his public acceptance was based more on military victory than legitimized acceptance. He had worked tremendously to justify his rise on religious and moral grounds, but that did not completely obliterate the fact that his predecessor was legally invested with the

²⁵ Ya'qūbī describes a similar episode but he speaks of the king of Tibet instead of the king of Kābul, as the one converting to Islam, and sending al-Ma'mūn a golden statue on a throne of gold studded with jewels. Ya'qūbī says that al-Ma'mūn sent this gift to the Ka'ba to show the people how the king of Tibet accepted Islam (*ya'rifa al-nās hidāyat allāh li-malik al-tubbat [Tibet]*): Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 452).

²⁶ Part of this text reads:

The *imām* al-Ma'mūn . . . ordered that this crown be carried from Khurāsān and put on display in the very spot where the two condition letters [i.e., Hārūn's Protocols] were hung inside the Ka'ba. This is done in order to thank God for victory over the one [al-Amīn] who acted treacherously, and [is also done] in reverence to the Ka'ba . . . The *imām* hopes for great reward from God for healing the rupture which the "deposed" one inflicted on religion by his daring to break what had been confirmed in the House of God and His sanctuary . . . We have hung this crown after the treachery of the "deposed" one [al-Amīn] and his removal and torching of the two condition letters, so God has deprived him of his dominion by the sword and set fire to his property as an example and reminder, and in punishment for what his hands had been responsible for. And God is not an oppressor of his servants. And [this was done] after the *imām* al-Ma'mūn, may God bring him bounty, in Khurāsān had conferred [*ʿaqad*] on Dhū'l-Riyāsatayn al-Faḍl b. Sahl and appointed him to [the territories of] the east, and after the black banner reached the lands of Kābul and the Indus river . . . All gratitude is due God the One who glorifies whomsoever obeys Him, and the One who condemns whomsoever disobeys Him . . . May God's peace be upon Muḥammad the prophet and his family and companions. Written by al-Ḥasan ibn Sahl, the brother of Dhū'l-Riyāsatayn, in the year AH 199. (Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld [Leipzig, 1858], 169).

A similar piece of propaganda against al-Amīn is articulated in another proclamation by al-Ma'mūn known as "Risālat al-Khamīs" (A. El'ad, "'L'Épître a l'armée' al-Ma'mūn et la seconde da'wa," *Studia Islamica* 67 [1988], 39–44).

caliphate, that political overthrow was anathema to both the Islamic and Sasanian traditions, and that the cost of civil war was too great to justify. Contemporary observers could see in the conflict nothing less than a neo-*fitna* that evoked the controversial memory of the early Islamic civil wars.

How Muslims remembered the history of the early *fitnas* on the eve of al-Rashīd's death is difficult to establish, since the narratives of the early *fitnas* are critically influenced by the chroniclers' consideration of the causes and results of the 'Abbāsīd civil war and the *miḥna*. However, there was probably sufficient material to warrant a comparison. The political predicament in both situations was the same: what does a community do at a political deadlock, when the ruler fails to deliver a perfectly righteous government, and when the path to pietistic reform and demand for justice is ignored? Needless to say, the story of the early *fitnas* is notoriously ambiguous in the sources. Issues are never clearly identified or coherently separated from one another. Aside from shadowy conditions of beginning, issues are compounded by independent distortions, which lend an impetus for the beginning of new controversies and issues. Actors may uphold a moral idea when they themselves have little moral or religious significance, while others with a richer moral identity seem hesitant to carry through on what seems on the surface the righteous path.

The ambiguity and asymmetry in the relation between actors and issues, identities and changing times in the story of the early *fitnas* involves a set of highly complex narratives that fall outside the scope of the present discussion. One should note, however, that whereas the moral identity of the participants in the early *fitnas* is ambiguous, the morality of the actors in the Amīn–Ma'mūn war is often clearer. This was in part a result of al-Ma'mūn's sustained effort to forge an official historiography, but was also a result of the fact that al-Amīn's personality was more vulnerable in terms of its religious and historical significance than that of the *ṣaḥāba* (the companions of the Prophet).

The analogy between the internal strife in both ages inspired narrators to draw a correlation between the actors, situations, and contested ideas in the two eras. There were two venues open for exploration. The first enticed observers to compare the conflict to that between 'Uthmān and his challengers, especially in light of the fact that both conflicts ended in the murder of the caliph. The other afforded a possibility for comparing the Amīn–Ma'mūn conflict with that between Mu'āwiya and 'Alī. Mu'āwiya's challenge to 'Alī over the question of seeking justice was echoed with parallel language in al-Ma'mūn's camp, and in both situations, the provincial challenge to the caliph encouraged new forms of opposition against the caliph that ultimately further weakened his position and led to his murder.

Whichever scenario al-Ma'mūn pondered, it was clear that the comparative opportunities invariably associated al-Ma'mūn with a party guilty of the final tragedy. Since neither association with the opponents of 'Uthmān nor with Mu'āwiya was religiously flattering, al-Ma'mūn set out to respond to these

historical perspectives. In 827 (AH 212), he made the official declaration that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib was the most excellent among the *ṣaḥāba*,²⁷ and he forbade anyone to praise Mu'āwiya.²⁸ Such official announcements may seem somewhat out of place, given that by that time the caliph had abandoned his pro-'Alid policy and had even turned against them.²⁹ The declaration of the excellence of 'Alī, however, was not meant as a defense for the 'Alid claims to rule (whether on the basis of the 'Alid claim for inheritance of the Prophet or as an admission of the special religious knowledge of 'Alī), but rather was only used to argue that the caliphal office could only be filled by a candidate who was excellent in religious terms. Since 'Alī clearly had an older and closer association with the Prophet than Mu'āwiya, the latter as well as the other *ṣaḥāba* were now viewed as less worthy of succession to the caliphate than 'Alī. Pietism combined with the Hashemite tie, al-Ma'mūn was trying to stress, were the crucial qualities to consider in selecting a caliph. This argument indirectly supported al-Ma'mūn's apologetic narrative in challenging al-Amīn, and established firm limits to the notion that submission to political authority is unquestionably necessary. In another way, however, al-Ma'mūn's laudatory declaration of 'Alī's superiority meant that the caliphal office was a religious office. This was a crucial step as the caliph stood on the verge of launching the *miḥna*, where he was about to extend his political authority into the juridical domain.

What motivated the caliph to make these statements is something of an enigma. The religious and juridical side-effects of these declarations seem somewhat indirect and can only be hypothesized. It may be that the statements regarding the comparative excellence of the *ṣaḥāba* were intended to help redefine the basis of caliphal legitimacy. Declaring the superiority of 'Alī probably implied that, as a relative of the Prophet, 'Alī was a more eligible candidate for the office of the caliphate than were the preceding Rāshidūn caliphs. This argument traditionally served the political claims of the 'Alids to the caliphate, but now was being used by al-Ma'mūn to cope with 'Abbāsīd political problems. With the new 'Abbāsīd "Alid" historical dogma, al-Ma'mūn was going to reshape the basis of 'Abbāsīd political caliphal legitimacy from the historical and hereditary argument to a more religious one. By fostering this view as official dogma, the caliph would have been indirectly structuring a particular reading of the early Islamic *fitnas* and of history to help justify the problem of his war with al-Amīn, the 'Abbāsīd *fitna*. Invoking a criterion of pietism for evaluating the relative worthiness of the early successors allowed al-Ma'mūn to articulate better the legitimacy of his old challenge to al-Amīn, and put the caliph in a more secure position for pushing forward in the future with the *miḥna*.³⁰

²⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1099. ²⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 1098. This move was made in AH 211.

²⁹ C. L. Geddes, "Al-Ma'mūn's Shi'ite Policy in Yemen," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 59–60 (1963–64), 107.

³⁰ D. Sourdel correctly reads al-Ma'mūn's authoritarian designs but both he and Gabrieli exag-

The question of the *tafḍīl* (or “establishing the excellence”) of ‘Alī, however, also has to be studied in light of a contemporaneous controversy that centered on the caliphs Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Suddenly, during the years of the *miḥna*, we begin to notice that the ‘Abbāsids were monitoring public attitudes toward those first two caliphs. In what may have been an indirect response to the *tafḍīl* of ‘Alī by al-Ma’mūn, the orthodox camp pressed for religious reverence toward Abū Bakr and Umar, arguing that these two caliphs should be viewed as superior to other *ṣaḥāba*. The proponents of this position further added that detractors of the two caliphs should be severely punished. This orthodox counter-proposition put the ‘Abbāsids in an awkward position, forcing them in the end to accede to an orthodox religio-historical view that has been an article of orthodoxy ever since, namely that the order of excellence among the *ṣaḥāba* follows the order of the succession of the Rāshidūn caliphs.

Putting aside the apologetic factor, however, al-Ma’mūn’s propaganda centered largely on self-glorification. The image of an ascetic caliph, scrupulously applying Islamic traditions and primarily interested in the conversion of non-Muslims on the eastern frontier rather than in forcibly subjecting them to harsh taxation, was the ‘Abbāsīd remake of an idea that was originally Umayyad – the story of ‘Umar II. When that Umayyad caliph broke with his dynasty’s authoritarian policies, adopted an ascetic lifestyle, and instructed his governors to encourage conversion to Islam rather than territorial expansion, many viewed the appearance of such a just and austere ruler as the inauguration of a messianic moment. A popular ḥadīth that stated “Every century God endows the community with a figure who will revive its religious life”³¹ was quickly understood as a reference to ‘Umar II.

Emerging as the ruler at the turn of the second Islamic century, al-Ma’mūn was now eager to appear as the new *mahdī* of the community. The various elements of religious propaganda, recounted above, were all calculated to sustain this image, but after a lukewarm reception by the *‘ulamā’*, the caliph finally took the bold step in 816 (AH 201) of declaring himself “God’s caliph,” and inscribed this title on his coinage. Al-Ma’mūn’s ambitions even here had to recognize some limits. The numismatic record of this new caesaro-papist pretense shows that the issuance of this new epithet took place in mints in the eastern lands of the caliphate, where it was perhaps most accepted.³² This

gerate the danger of the ‘Alid rebellions of around AH 199 as a motive in shaping al-Ma’mūn’s religious response. The tendency to find in al-Ma’mūn an heir to the “liberal” Barmakid policy of religious tolerance, ‘Alid sympathy, and interest in rational inquiry is, however, anachronistic, and falls victim to the orthodox construction of Hārūn al-Rashīd as a strict applicant of the Sunna: D. Sourdel, “La Politique religieuse du Calife ‘abbaside al-Mamūn,” *Revue d’Etudes Islamiques* 30 (1962), 27–48; F. Gabrieli, *al-Mamūn e gli ‘Alidi* (Leipzig, 1929). On the impact of the civil war on ‘Abbāsīd political and religious authority and caliphal legitimacy, see Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, 93.

³¹ ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, *al-Nihāya fī l-Fitan wa l-Malāḥim*, ed. A. ‘Abd al-Shāfi (Beirut, 1988), 17; also Khaṭīb, II, 61–62.

³² The inscription “God’s Caliph” appears only on coins struck in eastern mints: Marw, Samarqand, Herāt, Rayy, and Iṣfahān.

restricted numismatic provenance for the new title perhaps shows that the idea of divinely inspired rulership was a concept that gained popularity mostly in the former Sasanian territories, where the principle of divinely elected monarchs stood at the core of Iranian monarchal tradition and was constantly working its way into the concept of the caliphate. Standing at the crossroads of the second century, al-Ma'mūn tried to merge, under the aegis of a Mahdist-monarchal movement, the two currents of religious revival and messianic expectation.

The conflicting portrayals of al-Ma'mūn

When describing al-Ma'mūn's personality, the early medieval sources generally leave us with a fine impression of the caliph. The anonymous chronicler of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, for example, describes him by saying: "As for his conduct, it cannot be concealed from anyone the generosity, magnanimity, upright behavior, thoughtfulness, justice, and knowledgeability of al-Ma'mūn."³³ With slight variations, other sources provide similar descriptions. Dīnawarī, for example, states: "He was noble (*shahman*), energetic (*ba'īd al-himma*), restrained (*abiyy al-nafs*), a star among Banū al-'Abbās in knowledge and wisdom . . . then he invaded the Romans and accomplished important conquests."³⁴ Ṭabarī concurs with the others and provides a set of anecdotes to illustrate his praiseful comments. We are told, for example, that the caliph's generosity was such that he would give away state revenues to the needy, leaving almost nothing for his administrators to run the government.³⁵ Touring the provinces, the caliph sternly observed the performance of his judges, dismissing some the moment their reputations became suspect.³⁶ And throughout his years as ruler, we are told, the caliph always maintained a refined taste for poetry and humorously interacted with his subjects.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī brings the process of idealization into the caliph's childhood, portraying him as a precocious paragon of wisdom and sensitivity. He cites a story told by Abū Muḥammad al-Yazīdī, the tutor employed to educate al-Ma'mūn in his childhood. Al-Yazīdī recounts that once, on one of his routine study visits to the apartments of al-Ma'mūn, he was surprised that al-Ma'mūn was not present for the session. The old scholar, offended by the child's lack of punctuality, took this as a sign of laziness. By the time al-Ma'mūn arrived, al-Yazīdī had decided to sternly discipline the boy. He therefore had him struck seven times on his behind in a manner that drove al-Ma'mūn to tears. "It so happened, however," al-Yazīdī recounts, "that no sooner had we finished with this punishment than we heard the guard declare

³³ *Al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 379; similarly Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 468.

³⁴ Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, 396.

³⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 1143; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 468–69; *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 36–38. Ibn Bakkār recounts the story on the authority of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, the Ṭāhirid governor.

³⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1150.

that Ja'far b. Yahyā was about to enter. Quickly [al-Ma'mūn] reached for a handkerchief to wipe his tears, and put his clothes back on. He then pulled himself together, mounted his seat, and after settling in it comfortably, he commanded, 'Show him in.'" The timing of this visit by a man who was entrusted with the supervision of all the affairs of al-Ma'mūn could not have been worse for al-Yazīdī, who now became terrified that al-Ma'mūn might rush in his childish anger to tell Ja'far what had happened. If this were to occur, the results could be disastrous. To al-Yazīdī's surprise, however, al-Ma'mūn carried on an amiable conversation with Ja'far until the meeting was over, and Ja'far left satisfied with the way things appeared. After Ja'far's departure, al-Ma'mūn turned to al-Yazīdī and asked if he wanted to continue with the punishment. Amazed at all of this, the tutor frankly told the prince that throughout Ja'far's visit, he was afraid that al-Ma'mūn might tell Ja'far. To al-Yazīdī's surprise, al-Ma'mūn told him, "Don't be silly. Do you think I would have divulged this to al-Rashīd, and thus let him know that I am in need of good manners, much less inform Ja'far of that?!" "Never think of such considerations," al-Ma'mūn then concluded, "even if you are forced to do this a hundred times each day."³⁷

Many of the flattering anecdotes recounted by the chroniclers about al-Ma'mūn may well have been contrived for a literary purpose beyond the mere description of a person or a historical setting. Even so, it remains significant that, among the caliphs, narrators chose al-Ma'mūn to play the key role in illustrating certain secular political and ethical ideals. Somewhat more unusual in the sources is the way they represent his religious image. On the whole, al-Ma'mūn is admired for his piety, attention to justice, and good nature, but his pietistic image bears a unique aspect among the early 'Abbāsīd caliphs. For, whereas al-Rashīd's religiosity is cast in terms of ritualistic piety, al-Ma'mūn's is grounded in his learnedness in the areas of *fiqh*, ḥadīth, and the art of reasoning. When a woman, for example, complains to the caliph that her relatives have cheated her upon the death of her husband and stolen her inheritance by giving her a mere one dinar, al-Ma'mūn's mind quickly builds a legal scenario on the basis of this comment, showing the woman that in light of a certain arrangement of her family this, in fact, is her rightful share.³⁸ On other occasions the caliph is shown confidently challenging the verdict that a learned judge, such as Bishr b. al-Walīd, issued, proving him wrong before an assembly of religious scholars.³⁹

Al-Ma'mūn's campaign of self-idealization no doubt provided the initial impetus for this overly favorable representation, but in the end it leaves us wondering how the 'ulamā' reacted to this official trend of flattery. In theory, the 'ulamā' were probably willing to accept the pietistic pretensions of al-Ma'mūn, so long as these merely connoted erudition or a scholarly interest in

³⁷ Khaṭīb, X, 184; Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn*, 577.

³⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, I, 276.

³⁹ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 468.

the religious sciences. The *‘ulamā’*, however, no doubt sensed trouble when it became clear that these pro-caliphal praises were reaching a bit too high when it was declared that the caliph’s religious knowledge derived not merely from learning, but from inspiration as well. Stories began to develop that described the caliph having foreknowledge of events that were not yet known to other believers, including the *‘ulamā’*. Al-Faḍl b. Sahl, for example, claimed that from the outset of the succession crisis, al-Ma’mūn had had foreknowledge of the victory of Tāhir b. al-Ḥusayn over the army of ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā.⁴⁰ This represents one example of such attributions to al-Ma’mūn, but an anecdote provided by the tenth century al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī most succinctly illustrates this point. Al-Baghdādī quotes the caliph’s chief judge, Yaḥyā b. Aktham, as saying: “I once happened to be asleep in the quarters of al-Ma’mūn when I suddenly heard a commotion in the chamber. When I rose to inquire about it, I noticed that the caliph had awakened from his sleep. When I asked him if there was anything the matter that he should wake up in the middle of the night, he said, ‘Just now in my sleep I heard a voice in a dream telling me:

Sleeper of the night awake
Misfortune surely has some devious ways
Your trust in time can get undone
Just as a shirt can get unbuttoned”

Ibn Aktham then said, “So we called in the servants, and told them to search the room, whereupon they found a snake (*ḥayya*) right under his bed.” Seeing this, Ibn Aktham reportedly marvelled at how the caliph had acquired knowledge of the unknown (*‘ilm al-ghayb*) in addition to his scholarly expertise in other areas.⁴¹ By assigning to the caliph the power of mystical guidance, this story touches on a key aspect of the conflict in the *miḥna*, namely that the caliph, on account of his religious excellence, has the power to assert his religious-legal will above that of the *‘ulamā’*.⁴² Whereas the *‘ulamā’*’s religious

⁴⁰ Ghars al-Ni’ma Hilāl b. Muḥammad b. al-Ṣābi’, *al-Hafawāt al-Nādira*, ed. Ṣ. al-Ashtar (Damascus, 1967), 139.

⁴¹ This is reflected in a laudatory comment that Ibn Aktham once reportedly made to al-Ma’mūn when he told him: “O Commander of the Faithful, may God make me your ransom, when we discuss medical topics, you show the knowledge of Galen. If we discuss astronomy, you show the mathematical skill of Hermes, or in the area of *fiqh*, you are like ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him; and in generosity you are like Ḥātim and his free-giving; and when truthfulness is mentioned, you are like Abū Dharr with his candor, or generosity, you are Ka’b b. Amāma with his self-abnegation, or faithfulness, you are like al-Samaw’al b. ‘Ādiya with his sincerity.” Khaṭīb, X, 188. Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsini*, 438; Abū’l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Tāhir b. Abī Ṭāhir Tayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād* (Baghdad, 1968), 31.

⁴² Further evidence assigning revelatory power to al-Ma’mūn’s dreams can be found in the following story. Bayhaqī recounts on the authority of Aḥmad b. Abī Du’ād who said,

Al-Ma’mūn used to always dismiss the value of dreams and say, “It is not substantial, for if it were true [i.e., an indication of reality] we would see it fulfilled down to its details . . .” Now it happened once that he sent out his son al-‘Abbās on a journey into the land of the Byzantines, but then lost contact with him. He was entirely preoccupied with this situation when suddenly one day, after performing the dawn prayers, he [the caliph] appeared to us cheerful. He then said, “I will now tell you of a great wonder [*uḡ̃ubā*]. Just a little while

expertise in interpreting the law derives from their knowledge of ḥadīth, it was claimed, the caliph's derives from an innate dimension of religious inspiration.⁴³ Echoes of these religious pretensions of al-Ma'mūn can even be discerned in the accounts of al-Rashīd's reign. As he agonized over the decision of choosing a successor, al-Rashīd, we are told, once listened to a bedouin praise al-Ma'mūn as a child, saying, "[Verily] . . . I see in al-Ma'mūn the energetic wisdom of al-Manṣūr, the piety of al-Mahdī, the pride of al-Hādī and, if God would permit me to make a fourth analogy [i.e., prophethood], it would not be too far to see."⁴⁴ The construction of this distinct shroud of sanctity around al-Ma'mūn, aside from its clear ties to the caliph's ambitious religious policy during the *miḥna*, may have been nestled in places such as the Academy of Bayt al-Ḥikma, which attracted scholars from divergent Christian, pagan, and neo-Platonic traditions. The scene of the snake underneath the caliph's bed, for example, is borrowed from Porphyry who, as part of a series of signs glorifying the mystical powers of Plotinus, describes a snake that crawled from under Plotinus' death bed and made its way into the wall.⁴⁵

Now these various pretensions would lead us to expect a resolutely hostile reaction by the *'ulamā'* toward al-Ma'mūn. Surprisingly, the early medieval chronicles manifest no trace of outright hostility. Blame for the *miḥna* and angry sentiments are sometimes directed to the caliph's chief *qāḍī* during the *miḥna*, Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād. When asked about the religious character of Ibn Abī Du'ād, for instance, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal would comfortably declare him "*kāfirun bi'llāh al-'azīm*."⁴⁶ But such outright bitterness toward the caliph is hard to come by.⁴⁷ Mas'ūdī, Ṭabarī, Dīnawarī, and their narrators concur in

ago, I had the vision [dream] of an old man with gray hair and a beard dressed in a cloak and carrying a staff and a letter. He approached me when I was about to ride. When I asked him who he was, he said, 'the messenger of al-'Abbās who carries the news of his well-being.' He then handed me the letter." Al-Mu'taṣim then said, "I pray that God may fulfill the dream of the Commander of the Faithful, and bring joy to his heart with [al-'Abbās'] safety." Just when we all started to get up to depart, an old man appeared and started to approach us. Al-Ma'mūn then cried, "By God, this is the man I saw in my dream, exactly I described him to you." As the man came forward, the servants tried to prevent him, but he [al-Ma'mūn] said, "Let go of him," and then asked him, "Who are you?" "The messenger of al-'Abbās carrying a letter for you from him." We were all stunned by this event, and wondered greatly about this situation (*wa ṭāla ta'ajjubunā minhu*) [there is a resemblance between this reaction and the situation of al-Ma'mūn's death from tainted dates, below]. I then said to the caliph, "O Commander of the Faithful, will you go on rejecting the value of dreams after this event?" "No!" he said. (Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn*, 318)

⁴³ Note the use of the snake as a literary motif in an earlier part of 'Abbāsīd history, when 'Alī b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās reportedly dreamt that a black snake emerged from underneath 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī's mother and consumed her, an event quickly followed by the appearance of smoke from under Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr's mother that consumed the snake (see, Lassner, *Abbasid Rule*, 26; citing *Akhbār al-Dawla*, 138–40). The account is also in Khaṭīb, I, 65.

⁴⁴ *Murūj*, IV, 213; Lunde and Stone, *Meadows*, 83.

⁴⁵ Graham Anderson, *Sage, Saint, and Sophist* (London, 1994), 36. ⁴⁶ Khaṭīb, IV, 153.

⁴⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, for example, in his brief list of the leaders accused of *zanādaqa*, mentions the Barmakids, without commenting, and says that he read in the writings of the *zanādīqa* that al-Ma'mūn was one of them, but quickly hastens to say that this is a mere lie. (*Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. G. Flügel [Beirut, 1966], 338).

providing us with descriptions of the caliph and his policies that tend to be either neutral or sympathetic. One might surmise that these authors or their narrators succumbed to the pressure of official propaganda, leaving the pro-Ma'mūnid voice in the sources unchallenged. Yet upon closer examination of the texts of these authors, one finds that orthodox scholars did in fact sound a critical voice against the caliph from very early on. Perhaps the narrators of Ṭabarī and Mas'ūdī do not manifest the passionate anger of later writers such as Ibn Kathīr and Dhahabī, but this is only because the style of commentary was different in the early Islamic age. A reader who looks for a direct orthodox polemic against al-Ma'mūn is sure to come out disappointed, precisely as the chroniclers had planned. The critical message, however, is there, woven in the midst of Ma'mūnid hagiography and cast in the form of plausible historical facts.

In an anecdote describing one of al-Ma'mūn's several visits to Damascus toward the end of his reign, Ibn al-Athīr tells us that the caliph stopped at the family of a certain Sa'īd b. Ziyād and asked him about a document the Prophet had given them. Ibn Ziyād brought out the document and showed it to the caliph, who noticed some type of covering (*ghishā'*) on the seal. Surprised by the appearance of the elaborate seal, the caliph became curious about its purpose, and his associates (specifically al-Mu'tasim) suggested that he unravel the seal to see what it hid. Here, however, the caliph rejected the suggestion, saying: "This no doubt is a bind that the Messenger of God folded, and far from be it that I should unravel a knot that the Messenger of God tied together." He then held the seal, put it on his eyes, tearfully turned to al-Wāthiq, and said, "Here, take it and put it on your eyes; perhaps God will cure you!"⁴⁸ To appreciate the significance of this anecdote, one has to read it against the background of the *miḥna*, which among other things established the doctrine of denying the beatific vision. Al-Wāthiq, it will be remembered, took a particularly active role in pushing for this view. Read in light of the *miḥna*, this story then serves as an ironic and critical statement on the religious policy that al-Ma'mūn initiated. When the caliph breaks into tears and prays that God may cure al-Wāthiq, the message is an oblique form of self-rebuke, an admission of the correctness of the orthodox doctrine; that is, perhaps God will cure al-Wāthiq on the issue of the beatific vision.

The most pronounced examples of this oblique historiography can be found, as in Hārūn's case, in the death scene of al-Ma'mūn. The moment of death represented a favorite terrain for the chroniclers to critique the caliphs, given the human and religious meanings that it evoked. The physical weakness of the caliph at death provided a poignant contrast to his image of power and conscious planning during his lifetime. There are two different versions of the cause and situation of al-Ma'mūn's death. One of these shows the caliph dying

⁴⁸ *Al-Kāmil*, VI, 433; Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 148. Ibn Ṭayfūr cites this report on the authority of 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan b. Hārūn, who was told of the incident by Sa'īd b. Ziyād.

after eating tainted dates, while the other cites a splash by icy water. The two accounts do not, however, form divergently independent accounts, nor do they describe history as we shall see. One seems to have emerged in response to the other. Ṭabarī provides the story of the tainted dates in great detail.

Sa'īd b. al-'Allāf al-qārī,⁴⁹ one of Ṭabarī's narrators, recounts that when al-Ma'mūn set out on his campaign against the Byzantines in Asia Minor, the caliph summoned him to the frontier to hear his Qur'ānic recitation.⁵⁰ He states:

One day he [al-Ma'mūn] summoned me. I was brought to him at Budandun. I found him sitting on the bank of the river Budandun with Abū Ishāq al-Mu'taṣim seated at his right hand. He bade me, and I sat down near him, and behold, at that moment, he and Abū Ishāq were dangling their feet in the water [of the river] of Budandun. He said to me, "O Sa'īd, dangle your feet in this water too, and taste it; have you ever seen water more cool, more sweet and more clear than this?" I did [as he instructed], and replied, "O Commander of the Faithful, I have never seen its like." He said, "What comestible would go well with this water, to follow it?" I replied, "The Commander of the Faithful knows best." He said, "Fresh green dates of the *azādh* variety!"

At the very moment when he was uttering these words, the clinking noise of the bridles of the mounts of the postal and intelligence service (*al-barīd*) could be heard. He turned round and looked, and behold, there were mules with panniers over their hind-quarters containing gifts. He said to one of his servants, "Go and see if there are any fresh dates amongst these gifts, and if there are in fact any fresh dates, see whether there are any of the *azādh* variety and bring them here." The servant came hurrying back with two baskets of the fresh *azādh* dates, as if they had been gathered from the palm tree that very moment. He vouchsafed thanks to God Most High, and we were most astonished at all this (*wa-aḡhara shukran li-llāhi ta'āla, wa kathura ta'jjubunā minhu*). Al-Ma'mūn said, "Come forward and eat some!" He and Abū Ishāq ate some, and I ate with them, and we all drank some of that water, but by the time we got up, each one of us had contracted a fever. That illness proved fatal for al-Ma'mūn, and al-Mu'taṣim continued to be ill till he reached Iraq, but I myself remained ill only for a short while."⁵¹

This account, representing a "pro-Ma'mūnid" version, reiterates the theme embedded in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's story above. Once again, the caliph is shown capable of foretelling events when he declares to his companions how wonderful it would be to eat dates in that setting, and then tells his attendant to fetch him dates from a caravan that arrives precisely at the moment he reveals his taste. When the narrator declares, "*fa-kathura ta'jjubuna minhu*," he no doubt implies that they were all astonished at how the caliph was mysteriously privy to events that had not yet materialized within the logical, sequential constraints of time and place. The account clearly extols the merits of the

⁴⁹ Ibn Miskawayh, who provides the same report, calls the narrator Sa'īd al-'Allāf al-Fārisī (*Tajārīb*, 467). ⁵⁰ It is unclear from where Sa'īd was traveling to the frontier.

⁵¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1136; Bosworth, *HT*, XXXII, 224; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 378; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārīb*, 467. Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 190–91.

caliph and his dynasty, and puts the *‘ulamā’* (the Qur’ānic reciter) at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the Hashemite family. Needless to say, messages such as the suggestion that the caliph was subject to divine inspiration must have irritated the *‘ulamā’*, but the latter, for various reasons, could not come out in the open and dispute the official account.

The next best approach was for them to craft an alternative description of al-Ma’mūn’s death, and to load it with messages that would provide a rebuttal for the official account. This orthodox response, represented by the account of al-Ma’mūn’s death from a splash of icy water, can be found in the work of Mas’ūdī, who weaves the story of al-Ma’mūn’s final illness and eventual death through the narrative of the caliph’s war with the Byzantines. Just after the caliph began his final military expedition against the Byzantines in Asia Minor, Mas’ūdī claims, the caliph had the following experience. Mas’ūdī states:

Continuing on his march, he [al-Ma’mūn] did not turn aside until he had taken fourteen strongholds [in Asia Minor]. Then he doubled back on his tracks and campaigned at ‘Ayn Budandun, better known by the name of al-‘Ashīra . . . He halted there, awaiting the return of the envoys from the fortresses, encamping on the banks of and at the very source of this river. Enchanted by the cool water, pure and limpid, and by the beauty of its countryside and its vegetation, he had long planks cut down and laid above the source, over which they built a kind of pavilion of poles and the leaves of trees, and he settled down in this rustic shelter which had been made for him and beneath which rose the spring. They threw in a beautiful silver coin, and the water was so clear that he could read the inscription at the bottom of the river, and so cold that no one could bathe in it.

Meanwhile, a fish appeared, a cubit long and bright as a silver ingot. A reward was promised to anyone who could catch it. An attendant hurried down, got the fish, and climbed back onto the bank, but as he approached the place, or rather the pavilion, where Ma’mūn was sitting, the fish wriggled, slipped through his hands, and plummeted back into the depths of the spring like a stone. The water splashed on to the breast, neck, and collar-bone of the Caliph and soaked his clothes. The servant hastened back down, caught the fish and placed it, quivering in a napkin, before the Caliph. Ma’mūn said: “Fry it!” But at that instant he was suddenly overcome with a shivering fit and could not move. It proved useless to wrap him in blankets and quilts; he continued to tremble like a palm leaf and cry: “I’m cold! I’m cold!” They carried him to his tent, covered him, and lit a big fire, but he continued to complain of the cold. When the fish was fried, they brought it to him, but he did not even want a taste – his suffering was too great for him to touch it.

As he grew worse, Mu‘taṣim, his brother, questioned Bakhtīshū‘ and Ibn Māsawayh about the condition of the sick man, who was already dying. He asked them what conclusions medical science could provide and whether it could even restore him to health. Ibn Māsawayh took one of the sick man’s hands and Bakhtīshū‘ the other, and they both felt his pulse at the same time; its irregularity indicated that the end was near. Their hands stuck to his chin on account of the sweat that had broken out all over his body and was flowing like syrup or the slime of a viper (*af‘ā*). When Mu‘taṣim was told of this, he asked the two doctors to explain it to him, but they could not, for it was in

none of their books. They did declare, however, that it presaged the swift dissolution of the body.

At this moment, Ma'mūn regained consciousness and came out of his stupor. He ordered some Byzantines to be summoned and asked them. . . the Arabic name for that place and they told him that it was Raqqa⁵² – “Water Meadow.” Now a horoscope cast at the time of Ma'mūn's birth stated that he would die at a place of this name, which is why the prince always avoided living in the town of Raqqa, fearing to meet his death there . . . He no longer doubted that it was that same place where his horoscope predicted he would die.

Ma'mūn had his doctors called, hoping that they would cure him, but feeling worse, said: “Carry me out that I may look at my camp and gaze at my men and my kingdom one last time.” It was night. As he looked over the tents, the long lines of soldiery and the camp fires, he cried out: “Oh You Whose reign will never end, have pity on him whose reign is ending!” Then he was taken back to his bed.

Mu'tašim, seeing that he was growing worse, had someone whisper into his ear the Muslim profession of faith. As the man raised his voice so that Ma'mūn could repeat his words, Ibn Māṣawayh said to him: “There is no need to shout, for truly he can no longer distinguish between his God and Mani.” The dying man opened his eyes. They were unnaturally large and extraordinarily brilliant and shot with red; their like had never been seen. He reached out his hands to seize Ibn Māṣawayh, he made an effort to speak to him, but could not. His eyes turned to heaven and filled with tears. At last his tongue was loosened and he said these words: “Oh You Who are undying, have pity on him who is about to die!” He died immediately. It was on Thursday, the thirteenth day before the end of Rajab 218 AH/833 AD. His body was carried to Tarsus and buried in that city.⁵³

A surface reading of the circumstances of al-Ma'mūn's death, as described in this account, may not sound religiously unflattering. The caliph's fatal illness comes as he is embarked on a *jihād* campaign, making his death approach the status of martyrdom. His final words convey a sense of deep, simple conviction in the faith, and his austere reflection on the extent of his military power and on the ephemerality of caliphal majesty shows the birth of wisdom in his final hours of life. The caliph's manifestation of deep anger at the Manichaean reference of Ibn Māṣawayh also provides a fine orthodox moment. Al-Ma'mūn, who is often represented preferring the company of philosophers and scientists to that of traditionalist religious scholars, is finally shown turning against his Christian physician, awakening from his coma to defend the words of the anonymous religious scholar at his bedside. The religious scholar, who is marginalized in the “tainted dates” account, assumes the pivotal role of mediating the caliph's absolution in the “icy water” story.

Both the historicity of the account and the seeming image of orthodox redemption of al-Ma'mūn can be questioned, however, if we examine the

⁵² Ibn Khurādādhbeh also states that the Budandūn spring is also called “Rāqa” (Abu'l-Qāsim 'Ubaydallāh b. 'Abdallāh b. Khurādādhbeh, *al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje [Leiden, 1889], 110).

⁵³ Lunde and Stone, *Meadows*, 219–20 (with a slight variation). Parts of the account are also in Zakariyya b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī, *Athār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-'Ibād* (Beirut, n.d.), 220.

significance of some of the story's thematic and symbolic elements. The opening of this story, describing the caliph enjoying a rest by a stream in a rustic environment, seems to derive its stylistic and descriptive inspiration from the "tainted dates" account. But that is where emulation stops. The rest of the account represents a barrage of encoded attacks on the caliph.

It all begins suddenly, when the caliph becomes interested in catching the bright fish. Although banal on the surface, the fish story in fact tells us more than the caliph's culinary preferences. The reference to fishing in al-Ma'mūn's story should evoke a similar story attributed to al-Amīn. Under the annals of al-Amin's reign, the chroniclers tell us that when news of al-Ma'mūn's first victory over the armies of the caliph, led by 'Alī b. 'Īsā, reached Baghdad in 811 (AH 196), al-Amīn had gone out to the Tigris on a fishing excursion with his servant, Kawthar. When the messenger approached the caliph and broke the news of defeat, al-Amīn angrily spurned him, saying, "Woe to you! Leave me. Kawthar has already caught two fishes, and I haven't caught anything yet."⁵⁴ Read in light of other degrading descriptions of al-Amīn, this story seems to confirm the negative image of al-Amīn. The caliph's reaction is ridiculous enough, and prepares the reader to look warmly on the imminent proclamation of al-Ma'mūn as Commander of the Faithful, which took place in Khurāsān right after this decisive battle, and invites us to examine how al-Amīn was forfeiting the legitimacy of his rulership by neglecting state affairs.

When we re-read al-Amīn's anecdote in conjunction with al-Ma'mūn's death scene, we can discern that in both stories the fish symbolizes the political objective of both brothers, the caliphate. Al-Amīn's failure to catch the fish connotes his loss of power, and al-Ma'mūn's similar failure mirrors al-Amīn's story in an ironic, satirical way. The suggestion here is that, despite his victory in the war and pietistic attempt to emulate Hārūn's campaign against the Byzantines, al-Ma'mūn until the very end failed to catch that fish. Al-Amīn had failed to get hold of the fish in the waters of his capital's river, the Tigris, while al-Ma'mūn would also not reach that goal even in the waters of a river on the border of the empire. The thrust of ironic depiction in the episode is enhanced by the fact that whereas the royal brothers fail to catch the fish, their servants easily succeed, and do so in a way that reflects on their patrons. Al-Ma'mūn's servant catches the same fish twice, the first catch perhaps evoking al-Amīn's similar failure; and al-Amīn's servant, Kawthar, catches two fish, symbolizing the fall of the two brothers into the net of fate.⁵⁵ In both cases,

⁵⁴ Tabarī, III, 803. Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 57.

⁵⁵ For another example of the usage of the fish as a portent of imminent political failure, we could examine a story associated with the Persian commander Rustam that occurred just before the battle of Qādisiyya. Tabarī quotes a certain Sa'īd al-Marzubān as saying that Rustam's astrologer had a vision on the eve of the battle and recounted the story to Rustam, saying, 'I saw Aquarius in the sky in the form of a bucket emptied of water. I saw Pisces in the form of fish in shallow water and in a state of commotion, and I saw Pegasus (*al-Na'ā'im*) and Venus shining.' When Rustam heard this, he told him, 'Woe to you, have you told anyone about this?' The man said, 'No.' '[Then] keep it secret!' Rustam said." Tabarī, I, 2266; Friedmann, *HT*, XII, 62.

inferior members of the entourage produce accomplishments that greatly contrast with their rank and supply the historiographic characters that satirize the caliphs.⁵⁶

On the religious front, the criticisms are also scathing. The suggestion in the "tainted dates" account that the caliph possessed religious foreknowledge is answered here in various dramatic ways. We can note part of the orthodox criticism in the segment that describes the caliph's desire to eat the fish fried. The symbolic significance of his choice and of his failure to reach his goal can be understood only in light of another fragment of medieval thought. Here we must turn to the medieval zoological text of al-Damīrī, who states that, according to traditional beliefs, when a person dreams of eating fried fish this signifies that the person's prayers (*du'ā'*) are likely to be answered. Al-Damīrī then builds his commentary in reference to the Qur'ānic story of Jesus asking God to provide the disciples with a dinner banquet in answer to their wish for a miracle. Although the Qur'ānic account only mentions the general fulfillment of Jesus' prayer, al-Damīrī gives the exegetical note that that dinner included fried fish. The fulfillment of Jesus' prayer with that food, therefore, provided a basis for dream interpretation in later times.⁵⁷ The ironic connection between this symbolic connotation and the image of al-Ma'mūn's final moments can now be explained. Al-Ma'mūn's final supplication for forgiveness, "O, the One whose dominion does not end, take mercy on one whose dominion has ended,"⁵⁸ conveys more than a standard believer's plea for absolution. Orthodox scholars who crafted this text never forgot al-Ma'mūn's role in starting the *miḥna*, and very likely held him responsible both for provoking the civil war and for the murder of al-Amīn. The political responsibility of al-Ma'mūn for these blunders was here cast in religious terms, and it was left to the orthodox 'ulamā' to pronounce the final historical word on whether or not he is to be forgiven.⁵⁹

Al-Ma'mūn's insistence on frying the fish, his attempt to eat it as he was in the throes of fever, and the coming of his death before he could taste his dish of choice – "his suffering was too great for him to taste it" – teases the

⁵⁶ The creation here of a dialogical tie between the fates of the brothers is also hinted at in the connection between two stories about al-Amīn's and al-Ma'mūn's wine-drinking sessions and how their drinking cups were broken. Compare the account of "al-Amīn by the River" with the description of al-Ma'mūn's departure for Damascus, where characters of a marginal social rank (singers) also voluntarily establish a linkage of fate between the central characters.

⁵⁷ al-Damīrī, *Hayāt al-Ḥayawān*, II, 44. Although a source dating from later medieval times, al-Damīrī's work undoubtedly derives much of its information from earlier sources. Note, for example, that in his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ṭabarī also says that fish represented the food of Jesus' miraculous banquet (Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'an*, 12 vols. [Beirut, 1992], V, 134. See Muḥammad b. Sirīn, *Tafsīr al-Ahlām al-Kabīr* (Beirut, n.d.), 131, 213. Also see the observations of Artemidorus, who also states that an individual's dream of eating fish (and especially fried fish) is an auspicious sign. Artemidorus, *Kitāb Ta'bīr al-Ru'ya*, trans. Hunayn b. Ishāq, ed. A. M. al-Ḥanafī (Cairo, 1991), 86. ⁵⁸ The phrase is also quoted as al-Wāthiq's last words: Khaṭīb, XIV, 19.

⁵⁹ The curt nature of al-Ma'mūn's final prayers here also contrasts profoundly with his lengthy pietistic testament, found in Ṭabarī's chronicle (see p. 120 below).

medieval reader with suspense over the final outcome. Had he succeeded in tasting the fish, the symbolic implication would run, the caliph's prayer and wish would have been shown worthy of fulfillment. As it turns out, al-Ma'mūn's efforts were frustrated, and even with his final admission of guilt, the orthodox voice still leaves the caliph's judgment an open question.

Further traces of the orthodox ridicule of the caliph can be discerned in the segment that describes al-Ma'mūn's cry after being splashed by the cold water, "I'm cold! I'm cold!" To someone inclined to believe this account as a factual record, the caliph's words can logically be the reaction of a person fallen ill, but here the narrator probably intended to hint at a symbolic connection with the well-known image of the Prophet Muḥammad, returning home in panic and fright in the early phase of the revelation, and crying out as he reached his home, "Cover me! Cover me!" The satirical purpose of the *'ulamā'* in suggesting a similarity between al-Ma'mūn's words and the Prophet's should, again, be understood in light of al-Ma'mūn's caesaro-papist leadership pretensions and claims that his knowledge derived not only from learning, but also from divine inspiration.⁶⁰

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's story of al-Ma'mūn being warned in his sleep of an approaching snake and the implication that the caliph had prophetic powers (*'ilm al-ghayb*) clearly inspired the orthodox formulation of the segment that describes the caliph lying on his death bed and perspiring with an unknown liquid resembling the slime of a viper. The orthodox choice of imagery here was not random, but a direct response to a strand of Ma'mūnid propaganda. As we saw before, there may be some neo-Platonic factors that went into using the snake motif in the story provided by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. Orthodox narrators were probably responding to that imagery when they claimed that killing a snake is an action that provides religious merit.⁶¹

Like that of Hārūn, al-Ma'mūn's death scene demonstrates how a historical narrative was more than a linear factual account. The occasion of a death scene allowed the narrator to share with us his philosophy of life and his religious commentary, both of which were based on the historical record of the caliphs. In doing this, the narrator composed a text that drew on symbols from various sources of thought, and ultimately placed the historical text in dialogue with the very events that it supposedly addresses. The reader was then confronted with a text whose importance lay in the way it summed up a range of criticisms and indirectly summed up and debunked the various literary tropes evident in other parts of the historical tradition.

The orthodox depiction of al-Ma'mūn's death from a cold splash shows us that, despite the apparent acquiescence in the face of the civil war and the *miḥna*, nothing was forgotten. At the right moment, the orthodox narrators

⁶⁰ See above anecdote (p. 113) about al-Ma'mūn eating dates by the river.

⁶¹ Khaṭīb, II, 234.

were ready to express their discontent forcefully but discreetly. It is ironic that in their construction of a critical representation of the caliph, the opponents of al-Ma'mūn drew on the very imagery that the pro-Ma'mūnid camp had earlier woven into a hagiography. Themes and motifs were turned around to serve a diametrically opposite purpose, thereby undermining al-Ma'mūn's propaganda. The Mu'tazila could little control how a later generation would refashion the narrative into alternative imagery. Only after the defeat of the *miḥna* and with the benefit of hindsight could later observers notice that a counter-tradition was taking the form of a dialogue with the official tradition.

With this reading of the oblique dimensions in the more detailed narratives of the caliph's biography, one is encouraged to apply a similar approach for understanding even curt factual notes that chroniclers furnish about the caliph's biography. We can examine the following piece of evidence, for example, that again shows remote orthodox criticism at work. Biographical entries concur in asserting that al-Ma'mūn was born of a concubine who died giving birth to him. On the whole this sad circumstance of al-Ma'mūn's birth moves readers to sympathize with the orphan prince, and the story succeeds in enhancing the image of al-Ma'mūn during the succession crisis, namely as the marginalized and disenfranchised son of Hārūn. Humanitarian readings aside, medieval readers, accustomed to reading omens and signs in all the physical phenomena surrounding their lives and the lives of others, would have been alarmed by such a birth. That al-Ma'mūn was born as his mother died could have been perceived as a dark omen signaling the birth of a killer. To confirm this reading, we can turn to another similar account surrounding a personality whose credentials for destruction put him in a league of his own. This is Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī. A bit of unsavory hagiography surrounds Abū Muslim's birth as well. Just before he was born, the anonymous chronicler of the 'Abbāsids tells us, Abū Muslim's mother dreamt of a vulture emerging from her womb and devouring other birds of prey.⁶² In the throes of giving birth, the anonymous mother of Abū Muslim also dies. These signs, as Lassner has argued, may have been read as prophesying the birth of a blood-shedder of grand caliber.⁶³ If this were true regarding Abū Muslim, and this seems convincing enough, there is no reason why al-Ma'mūn's situation should be immune to a similar type of inferential reading, particularly in light of the controversy over his responsibility for the civil war.

Before leaving behind al-Ma'mūn in Ṭarsūs, we still need to examine one more version of his death-bed testament that we left hanging after al-Ma'mūn became mortally ill from the tainted dates. Ṭabarī's version of the story, unlike Mas'ūdī's account, includes a long expository will by the caliph which he allegedly declares to al-Mu'taṣim who was to his bedside. In outward terms this will is compatible with the pro-Ma'mūnid current of representation.

⁶² *Akhhbār al-Dawla*, 264 (cited in Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*, 114).

⁶³ Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*, 114.

Instead of the brief and dramatic utterance of a plea for forgiveness, this time the caliph makes a speech. There, the caliph starts with declaring his faith in God and in the Day of Judgment. He then reaffirms his belief in the Createdness of the Qurʾān and the prophethood of Muḥammad. He then makes a lengthy digression where he instructs those with him on how to undertake the funerary arrangements for his burial and perform the funeral prayer and asks them to refrain from mourning. He states:

Do not allow any weeping woman to be near me, for the person who is lamented over is thereby troubled. May God have mercy on a man who takes heed of warnings and who reflects on the annihilation that God inevitably brings down on all His creation and the inescapable death he decrees for them! So praise be to God who has made eternal existence a quality solely for Himself alone and has decreed annihilation for the whole of His creation! Next, let [such a heedful man] consider what my own state once was, with the might of the caliphate – has that been of any avail to me? No, by God! Indeed, I shall have to give a double accounting [at the last day] because of this responsibility. So would that ʿAbdallāh b. Hārūn had not been created as a human being (*fa-yā layta ʿAbdallāh b. Hārūn lam yakun basharan*), yea, would that he had not been created at all (*bal laytahu lam yakun khalqan*)!

Finally, the caliph turns to his brother al-Muʿtaṣim and tells him:

O Abū Ishāq, come close to me and derive a warning from what you see! Follow your brother's policy regarding the Qurʾān, and when God invests you with the caliphate . . . head speedily for the seat of your authority in Iraq . . . Launch against the Khurramiyya expeditions . . . [and] concentrate on them . . . Also, look to . . . ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir. Confirm him in his governorship, and do not disquiet him in any way . . . In regard to Abū ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Duʿād, make sure that he does not abandon your side, and associate with him as an advisor in all your affairs . . . Fear God in all your affairs. I commend you, as also myself, to God. I seek pardon from God from what has gone before, and I further seek pardon from Him for what I myself have committed; indeed, He is the all-forgiving one. Surely He knows the extent of my contrition for my sins; hence I place my confidence in Him from [the effects of] the worst of these sins, and to Him I turn in repentance.⁶⁴

This account, with its systematic progress, polished expression, and efficient style, could hardly be the utterance of someone in the throes of death. The question then becomes, who attributed this testament to al-Maʾmūn? His friends or enemies? Since the caliph begins by asserting his belief in the Createdness creed, it seems logical that the account was Muʿtazilī in origin. Later, however, the account seems to have undergone emendations. One suspicious aspect in the testament, for example, is the clear designation of al-Muʿtaṣim as successor. Other evidence shows that al-Muʿtaṣim succeeded to the throne either by altering the caliph's will, hastening the death of al-Maʾmūn, forcing al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn (the legitimate heir apparent) to renounce his rights of succession, or by doing all three (see below). If so, then

⁶⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 1136–40; Bosworth, *HT*, XXXII, 225–30.

al-Ma'mūn's death-bed testament, not surprisingly, accurately describes, having been drafted in the court of al-Mu'taṣim, the policy of the new caliph. It is curious indeed that al-Ma'mūn would not encourage al-Mu'taṣim to do anything with the Byzantine campaign even after having invested so much into its planning.⁶⁵ The return to Baghdad, al-Mu'taṣim's vigorous war against the Khurramiyya, and the stable relation established between the caliph and 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir in Khurāsān are all aspects that are read back in the will. Even more pointedly, al-Ma'mūn's advice that al-Mu'taṣim expand the role of the pro-Mu'tazilī judge Ibn Abī Du'ād in state affairs corresponds well to the hegemonic role that Ibn Abī Du'ād later occupied in the political affairs of Sāmarrā. This leads us to speculate that this testament may have been drafted in origin at the behest of Ibn Abī Du'ād or his supporters. However, later after having served the purpose of legitimizing al-Mu'taṣim's rise to power, the account of al-Ma'mūn's death underwent further additions. This time, orthodox commentators modified parts of the text to establish a direct reconciliation with al-Ma'mūn. Al-Ma'mūn's earnest admission of guilt for "the worst of these sins" can be read accordingly as an oblique reference to the *miḥna* or the murder of al-Amīn or both, while al-Ma'mūn's statement, "*fa-yā layta 'Abdallāh b. Hārūn . . . lam yakun khalqan*" forms an oblique reference to the createdness issue. The caliph's elaborate descriptions of the ideal funerary rites can also be connected with the question of the "torment of the grave," one of the controversial issues during the *miḥna*. In its stylistic tenor as well as in parts of its thematic constituents, al-Ma'mūn's declaration also closely mirrors the style, temperament, and orthodox approach in the account given by Ṭabarī of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb's death-bed will, which was addressed to his son 'Abdallāh.⁶⁶

Further orthodox responses to al-Ma'mūn: the redemption of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs

The lifting of the *miḥna* in 847 (AH 232) by command of the caliph al-Mutawakkil ended a religious dispute that increasingly threatened to throw Baghdad and Sāmarrā into a chaos similar to that of the civil war years. Al-Wāthiq's execution of the revered traditionist Aḥmad b. Naṣr b. Mālīk al-Khuzā'ī after a dramatic trial in which the latter refused to reject the orthodox doctrine of the beatific vision and to accept the createdness creed⁶⁷ was an episode that marked the frustration of the state in setting boundaries on religious interpretations. The caliphate may have intended this incident to be an example that would pressure others. But whether the move was motivated by religious or political considerations, the publicized murder of Aḥmad b. Naṣr turned him into a martyr whose image rallied populist religious and political

⁶⁵ W. Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780–842* (Stanford, 1988), 272–81.

⁶⁶ Ṭabarī, I, 2724–45, 2776–81. ⁶⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1343–49.

currents in the city. Instead of bringing all factions under the state control, the episode helped strengthen the bonds between political and religious opponents of the state, just as perhaps the executions of Zayd b. al-Ḥusayn and Yaḥyā b. Zayd brought unity to the divergent factions in Khurāsān before the revolution. The arbitrary policies of al-Wāthiq's action, now resting solely on the use of coercive power, like those of al-Ḥajjāj before, widened the gulf between the state and a religious opposition that was gradually attracting public sympathy. In view of this mounting pressure, the *‘ulamā’* could have found no better resolution for the *miḥna* affair than did al-Mutawakkil. The new caliph had finally spared them the now awkward task of revolution, and his action signaled the vindication of the orthodox position.

The *‘ulamā’* were undoubtedly most grateful for this turn of events, and sought to read in the caliph's action a signal of divine guidance on a journey toward the orthodox path. But al-Mutawakkil, unlike al-Ma'mūn, entertained no systematic plans for posturing as a rightly guided *imām*. For him, lifting the *miḥna* was simply the most sensible thing to do, and with that done, it was time to get back to his more pressing concerns, such as building his six palaces, going out on the hunt, and planning his resort city of Ja'fariyya. Unlike some of his predecessors, the young caliph, twenty-five years old on his accession, found little time to entertain ascetic guests or to invite ḥadīth scholars for amiable sessions of religious learning. To the *‘ulamā’*, al-Mutawakkil's aloofness and indulgent behavior was somewhat of a disappointment, but in truth they cared little for the caliph's attention now. In the post-*miḥna* era the *‘ulamā’* had resolved on running religious affairs in isolation from the caliphate, whose role was reduced to providing a stamp of approval.

To commemorate their victory and to ensure that orthodoxy would never again be threatened by *kalām* tendencies, the *‘ulamā’* needed expositional statements and images that evoked the righteous authority of their position. Al-Ma'mūn, through various Mu'tazilī thinkers, had devised various ways to support the position of the Mu'tazila or to underline the spiritual authority of his position. Now, after debunking these claims, the *‘ulamā’* needed an alternative, and they set out on a campaign to glorify their new political champion. The act of lifting the *miḥna* put al-Mutawakkil at the forefront of potential candidates for counteracting al-Ma'mūn. And, with or without his consent, orthodox tradition proceeded to heap surrealistic praises on the caliph, according him a unique status. One tradition summarized the point as follows: "The genuine caliphs of Islam are three: Abū Bakr, for he suppressed the Ridda; 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, for he eliminated the abuses of Umayyad rule; and al-Mutawakkil, for he eradicated innovations, and revealed the sunna."⁶⁸ Al-Mutawakkil's age became a match for that of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Azīz – forty years⁶⁹ – while another tradition enhanced the hagiography further by stating that on the night al-Mutawakkil was murdered, the sacred

⁶⁸ Khaṭīb, VII, 170.

⁶⁹ Khaṭīb, VII, 172.

well of Zamzam in Mecca collapsed (*ghārat*).⁷⁰ More innovative enthusiasts of the caliph, seeking to delineate fully the superiority of al-Mutawakkil, set out to develop a propagandistic tradition that specifically responded to the pro-Ma'mūnid narratives.

Al-Ma'mūn's supporters had once spread a story, which claimed to give the reason why the caliph had initially grown interested in philosophy and become eager to translate the classical works of Greek philosophers. Aristotle, the story goes, once appeared to al-Ma'mūn in a dream, and the two engaged in a brief session of rational inquiry. Al-Ma'mūn asked the dignified old man how he defined "the good." In answer, Aristotle said: "It is what is rationally good." When asked to elaborate on other definitions of the same principle, Aristotle said: "It is what is religiously good." And only in the third and last instance when pressed for yet another definition would the philosopher define it as: "What is good by popular convention."⁷¹ In its main outline, the story represented a clear rebuttal of the orthodox (particularly Shāfi'īs) definition of juristic foundations. The principle of consensus (*ijmā'*), whether of scholars or the community, here took secondary status to rational assessment. The debate over the dogma associated with these questions was to continue in various other forms. What concerns us here of all this debate, however, is only the polemical reworking of such a legend into a new political position that defended al-Mutawakkil. With the image of al-Ma'mūn and Aristotle in the background, orthodox narrators responded with another dream that was attributed to al-Mutawakkil.

In an account given by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, we hear 'Alī b. al-Jahm al-Sāmī saying: "The Commander of the Faithful [al-Mutawakkil] once summoned me. When I came to him, he said, 'O 'Alī, I just saw the Prophet, peace be upon him, in a dream. Seeing him, I rose and walked to him.' He then said, 'You rise to me even though you are a caliph!'" 'Alī b. al-Jahm then said, "These are glad tidings, Commander of the Faithful, for your standing symbolizes your undertaking of the *sunna*, and that he has counted you among the caliphs."⁷² This dream provides the antithesis of al-Ma'mūn's dream. Aristotle is here replaced by the Prophet, while reason is replaced by Sunna. The process of rebuttal continues in another account, which quotes a certain 'Alī b. Ismā'īl as saying that once, when he was in Ṭarsūs,⁷³ he saw al-Mutawakkil in a dream, after the caliph had died. "When I asked him how God has judged him," the narrator says, "[al-Mutawakkil] said, 'He pardoned me.' 'By what?' I said 'By the little of the *sunna* that I revived."⁷⁴ Again, this dream not only highlights the importance of al-Mutawakkil's defense of orthodoxy, but also provides a rebuttal of al-Ma'mūn because the dream is set in Ṭarsūs, the place where al-Ma'mūn was buried.

⁷⁰ Ibid. ⁷¹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 353. ⁷² Khaṭīb, VII, 170.

⁷³ The phrasing "*ra'aytu Ja'far al-Mutawakkil bi-Ṭarṣūs fī l-nawm wa huwa fī l-nūr jālis*" can also mean that it was al-Mutawakkil who was in Ṭarsūs. ⁷⁴ Khaṭīb, VII, 170.

With the refutation of al-Ma'mūn's pretensions, the orthodox tradition gradually grew less inclined to discuss the caliphal role in fostering the *miḥna*. The fact that the caliphs from al-Mutawakkil onward embraced orthodox creeds and worked to institutionalize them made the 'ulamā' more deferential to the position of the caliphs as symbolic religious leaders and protectors of orthodox religious law. This new bond between the caliph and the 'ulamā' redefined caliphal legitimacy and reshaped traditional sentiments toward the caliphate in a lasting manner. There were historiographical results subsequent to this transformation, as the 'ulamā' set out to create historical and conceptual bridges between the 'Abbāsid and the early Islamic caliphates. Quietism and obedience to political leadership now became an essential article of the orthodox faith – as was the cessation of discussing the history of the early *fitnas* – while the overlaying of historical narratives created more conflicting ambiguities in the representation of the past.

The satisfaction of the 'ulamā with the caliphal submission also necessitated a careful process of historical rehabilitation of the images of the *miḥna* caliphs. Whereas the earlier narrators crafted complex negative tropes about the caliphs, later narrators sought to offset these images with another body of overtly favorable information. How to exonerate the caliphs from direct responsibility for the *miḥna*, and to minimize discussion of its era altogether, now became the prime concern.

The apologetic solutions applied to each of the Mu'tazilī caliphs were quite varied. Al-Wāthiq, the most ardent of the Mu'tazilī caliphs, became, under the remade imagery, not quite as eager to push for the *miḥna*. In an anecdote recounted by Mas'ūdī, we are told how when Ibn Abī Du'ād debated an anonymous shaykh, said to be "*min ahl al-fiqh wa'l-ḥadīth min al-thaḡhr al-shāmī*" (a scholar of ḥadīth who lived on the Syrian–Byzantine frontier), the caliph was very pleased that the *muḥaddith* was able to challenge Ibn Abī Du'ād and show the power of the orthodox argument. The story ends by showing the reconciliation between the traditionalist-ascetic and the 'Abbāsid caliph. When the caliph feels sorry for the travails of the traditionalist prisoner for enduring an arduous trip to address these challenges, we hear al-Wāthiq ask the anonymous scholar if he would forgive him ("release him from responsibility for the *miḥna*"), and the traditionalist scholar says: "O Commander of the Faithful, I had freed you from this responsibility the moment I left my house, in deference to the Messenger of God, and to your kinship towards him." The caliph then offers him a reward, but the scholar turns it down and leaves.⁷⁵

Other statements in the sources sought to distance the caliphs from responsibility for the *miḥna*, and place a greater blame on Ibn Abī Du'ād. Thus, in his biography of Ibn Abī Du'ād, al-Khaṭīb states: "Ibn Abī Du'ād pushed the

⁷⁵ *Murūj*, V, 100–01: Mas'ūdī ← Šāliḥ b. 'Alī al-Hāshimī ← the caliph al-Muhtadī. Khaṭīb, IV, 151–52. The account is narrated by the caliph al-Muhtadī (al-Wāthiq's son). See also Khaṭīb, X, 75–78; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, XI, 361–65. Ibn al-Jawzī's final authority for this story is also al-Muhtadī.

caliphs to enforce the *miḥna*” (*wa ḥamala al-sultān ‘alā l-imtiḥān bi-khalq l-Qur’ān*).⁷⁶ And, in another instance, al-Wāthiq is partly protected from the blame for the *miḥna*, when it is stated that it was Ibn Abī Du’ād who pushed the caliph to insist on enforcing the *miḥna* (“*wa kāna Ibn Abī Du’ād qad istawlā ‘alā l-Wāthiq wa ḥamalahu ‘alā al-tashaddud fī l-miḥna*”).⁷⁷

These various statements were meant to show how the caliph was but a prisoner to a policy charted from the very beginning by an outsider to the ruling family. The strategy of representing the caliph as a victim of his advisors and someone with few options, we saw earlier, was an exercise applied just as much to al-Rashīd, and equally in the case of al-Ma’mūn and al-Faḍl b. Sahl. Al-Wāthiq, in the end, some accounts suggest, indeed retracted his support for the *miḥna*, even though it was al-Mutawakkil who officially abrogated the *miḥna*.⁷⁸

A similar exercise of exonerating the caliph was applied to al-Mu’taṣim. Although in this caliph’s case we do not get clear statements from al-Mu’taṣim denouncing the *miḥna*, we are still shown how Ibn Abī Du’ād was the chief force behind the interrogation in this caliph’s reign. And there may be some indirect meaning in the well-known cliché in the sources that characterizes al-Mu’taṣim as an almost illiterate person, a description that was probably intended to show that the caliph had little understanding of what was going on in the theological debates.⁷⁹

In the case of al-Ma’mūn, the process of defense was more difficult. This was partly because Ibn Abī Du’ād could not be brought to shoulder the blame for instigating the *miḥna* in al-Ma’mūn’s reign. Al-Ma’mūn had been the one who had appointed Ibn Abī Du’ād as judge in the first place, and had also been the one who instructed al-Mu’taṣim to consult the judge on all matters. Al-Ma’mūn’s responsibility for putting Ibn Abī Du’ād in such a critical position was uncontestable. The difficulty of rehabilitating al-Ma’mūn’s image also derived from another more awkward reality – the fact that, by the time the orthodox scholars had succeeded in pushing the caliph to lift the *miḥna*, there had already developed a substantial body of historical lore that was hostile to al-Ma’mūn.

It was only with difficulty now that a new, pro-caliphal, orthodox current sought to help protect al-Ma’mūn from further damage by silencing the voice of condemnation. No less an important figure was brought out to promote this defense than the former chief judge Yaḥyā b. Aktham, who had once been dismissed by al-Ma’mūn in disgrace. Ṭabarī tells us that, when al-Mutawakkil once asked Ibn Aktham about what al-Ma’mūn used to say regarding the Qur’ān, Ibn Aktham said, “He used to say, ‘Beyond the Qur’ān, there is no need for further knowledge of precepts, beyond the sunna of the Messenger there is no need for a single further action, and beyond clarification and

⁷⁶ Khaṭīb, IV, 142.

⁷⁷ Khaṭīb, XIV, 18. This account is also narrated on the authority of al-Muḥtadī.

⁷⁸ Ibid. ⁷⁹ Khaṭīb, III, 343. Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, VIII, 393.

exposition there is no need for further learning. And after rejecting of demonstration and truth, there is only the sword to manifest proof.”⁸⁰ When the caliph here noticed that Ibn Aktham was dodging the question, he told him, “That is not what I was after.” Ibn Aktham then put an end to the malicious query by saying, “One who claims to be charitable should cite only the good qualities of someone who is absent.”⁸¹ The choice of Ibn Aktham as the one to issue this verdict on al-Ma’mūn’s troubled past was specifically intended to reconcile the two historical opponents. The identity of the narrator in this case – as perhaps in many other narrative formations – was part of the ironic structure of the anecdote’s thematic content.⁸²

Other orthodox defenses of al-Ma’mūn took a more transparent form, such as in a report that Baghdādī provides to show that al-Ma’mūn was really uninterested in consorting with Mu’tazilī scholars. A clearly contrived account says that al-Ma’mūn once asked one of his chamber guards to find out who was waiting to enter into the caliph’s presence. When the man returned, he informed the caliph that those waiting were: Abū’l-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf, ‘Abdallāh b. Ibād, and Hishām b. al-Kalbī. Al-Ma’mūn reportedly commented, “Is there nobody bound to hell waiting at the door?”⁸³ Another sympathetic tradition sought to create a linkage between the physical appearances of the Prophet, al-Ma’mūn, and al-Mutawakkil,⁸⁴ while a more zealous report declared that the only two who knew the Qur’ān by heart among the caliphs in Islam were ‘Uthmān and al-Ma’mūn!⁸⁵

The reality of al-Ma’mūn’s abilities

Although the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd has elicited the largest number of biographies among the medieval caliphs, al-Ma’mūn should have probably been more deserving of such attention, considering the pivotal influence that he had in many areas of the early Islamic state. From beginning to end, al-Ma’mūn’s reign presents a continuously evolving program toward caliphal absolutism. From the political viewpoint, al-Ma’mūn is impressive for his ability to reunify the Islamic empire after its breakup during the civil war, to rebuild its administrative system, and to attempt to form new strata of religious, political, and military elite tied solely to him.

We are able to explore the caliph’s political strategies from the extensive information preserved in the sources about his reign. Despite the role of moralizing anecdotes about the civil war and the *miḥna*, the existence of a con-

⁸⁰ Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 189. ⁸¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1469–70, 189; *al-Kāmil*, VII, 102.

⁸² For another incident where Yaḥyā b. Aktham recounts the virtues of al-Ma’mūn, see *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 133, which quotes Yaḥyā b. Aktham directly. ⁸³ Khaṭīb, III, 369.

⁸⁴ ‘Alī b. al-Jahm is quoted as saying that al-Mutawakkil wore his hair long to his ears, just like al-Mu’taṣim and al-Ma’mūn (“*kāna li’l-Mutawakkil jumma ilā shahmat udhunayhī mithl abīhi wa’l-Ma’mūn*”: *Siyar*, XII, 31). Also note the ḥadīth that states that the Prophet wore his hair the same way. Al-Sahmī, *Ta’rīkh Jurjān*, 216.

⁸⁵ Khaṭīb, X, 190; Qazwīnī, *al-Tadwīn*, IV, 3.

siderable base of factual events set in his reign entices the historian to sketch a possible realistic portrait of the caliph. We may begin by looking at how the sources, as mentioned before, portray the caliph during the early years of the civil war as an inexperienced youth displaying a passive attitude toward events as policies were constantly charted in his name by domineering characters. The young caliph, at the time, is portrayed helplessly observing developments, innocent in intent, and desperately hanging on for survival rather than confidently expecting conquest. Al-Faḍl b. Sahl, as already mentioned, is shown in control of all political affairs, and al-Ḥasan b. Sahl in charge of the state's finances, while Harthama b. A'yan and Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn are presented as in charge of the military. Yet, very quickly after the victory is achieved, we find that the situation is suddenly overturned when all the key figures in al-Ma'mūn's state, Harthama b. A'yan, al-Faḍl b. Sahl, Ṭāhir (in his dismissal from command), and 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, fall from power, one after the other. A reader accustomed to the early image of the caliph cannot but wonder how this happened. If the caliph's state was indeed run by these individuals, then how can one explain their disappearance at the most politically opportune time for the caliph? This leads us to ask: was al-Ma'mūn, even in his youth, a truly passive leader?

The striking feature of al-Ma'mūn's caliphate is that it became better organized after he assumed command in 818 (AH 203) than it was in the days of the Sahlid hegemony, a situation that contrasts with al-Rashīd's state, which supposedly declined after the fall of the Barmakids. One can credit no one in al-Ma'mūn's government for this systematic policy of reviving the empire but the caliph himself. Throughout the second half of his reign, al-Ma'mūn appears to have consciously initiated and applied policies that suited his political objectives at every step. Whether through the use of force, diplomacy, or political calculation, al-Ma'mūn constantly managed to reextend the scope of his sovereignty. The diversity in his political methods and their dependence on the circumstances of his power can be gauged from various events. One sees his generous side in 818 (AH 203) when, on his way back from the east, al-Ma'mūn reduced the tax dues of al-Rayy by 2 million dirhams.⁸⁶ During that time, al-Ma'mūn was still a vulnerable man and needed to publicize the kindness of his government, and revitalize support, particularly in a city that acted as a crucial link on the road to Khurāsān. When he became established in Baghdad later on, however, al-Ma'mūn increasingly recognized the security of his government and was less forthcoming with such concessions. Hence, when the town of Qumm demanded a similar reduction in its tax rate in 825 (AH 210), the caliph turned a deaf ear, and instead sent his commander 'Alī b. Hishām to suppress the town's revolt by force.⁸⁷

This calculating attitude seems to have pervaded the caliph's larger program toward provincial recentralization. When the caliph felt threatened by the

⁸⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1092; Ibn al-Faḡh al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 270.

⁸⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1092.

Khurramī revolt in Azerbaijan, he took a conciliatory position toward the rebel of Jazīra, Naṣr b. Shabath al-ʿUqaylī, no doubt fearing a closer alignment between the political objectives of rebels so close to Baghdad's gates. And when the governor of Sind, Dāwūd b. Yazīd al-Muhallabī, died in 820 (AH 205), the caliph, still freshly settled in Baghdad and unable to cope with a political challenge in so distant a province easily, decided to appoint Dāwūd's son, Bishr, for the governorship, on the proviso that the son would remit to the central treasury 1 million dirhams a year.⁸⁸ The ʿAbbāsids had previously adopted such tax-farming practices only in the remote region of North Africa, where their political presence was minimal. However, when Bishr sought to declare his autonomy in 828 (AH 213) by withholding the sum, the caliph this time was ready to mount a punitive expedition against him under Ghassān b. ʿAbbād.⁸⁹

The caliph showed his best political talent in the way he devised a gubernatorial arrangement for Yemen. Yemen was a province long known for its sympathies to the ʿAlid cause, and this affinity proved dangerous between the years AH 199 and 202, when the province rebelled under Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā b. Jaʿfar al-Šādiq at a time of a widespread, concerted ʿAlid effort to undermine ʿAbbāsīd rule. Although the ʿAlid revolt in Yemen was put down by the commander, ʿĪsā b. Yazīd al-Julūdī, it was clear to the caliph that a more durable political formula was needed there. Soon afterward he sent the Yemenīs his choice for governor, Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh, a descendant of Ziyād b. Abīhi, the one-time ardently pro-Umayyad governor of Iraq in the reign of Muʿāwīya, with what may have been the promise of a hereditary governorship. At the side of the Ziyādī governor, the caliph assigned a minister descended from the line of the Umayyad caliph Hishām b. ʿAbd al-Malik, and a judge, Muḥammad b. Hārūn, from the formerly pro-Umayyad tribal confederation of Taghlib.⁹⁰ The appointment of Umayyads and historically pro-Umayyad tribal affiliates to run the affairs of Yemen may seem strange coming from an ʿAbbāsīd, but in taking this step al-Maʾmūn may have calculated that the historical tensions between the Umayyads and the ʿAlids would impel the new governor to enact more stringent and effective controls. It did not take long before this combination of elements soon proved untenable. In AH 206 Yemen, particularly the region of ʿAkk, revolted under the ʿAlid leader ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad b. ʿUmar b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, who again called for *al-Riḍā min āl-Muḥammad*. To address the situation, the caliph sent a military expedition out from Baghdad under the command of Dīnār b. ʿAbdallāh. There are no reports of a prolonged confrontation with the ʿAbbāsīd troops, and the region was brought to order in 822 (AH 207), but it was an odd moment when the rebels this time proved willing to submit to a commander sent by the caliph, but not to the local gov-

⁸⁸ Tabarī, III, 1044. ⁸⁹ Tabarī, III, 1100.

⁹⁰ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī b. al-Daybaʿ, *al-Faḍl al-Mazīd ʿalā Bughyat al-Mustafīd fī Akhbār Madīnat Zabīd* (Ṣanʿā, n.d.), 52.

error. This was to show the lingering hostility between the 'Alids and the Ziyādī governor.⁹¹

The caliph was as adept at handling foreign affairs as he was at internal matters. During his rule from Khurāsān, al-Faḍl b. Sahl is usually credited in the sources with the suggestion that the caliph reach out to neighboring princes in Transoxiana and Tibet. This attention to foreign powers continued in later years, as the caliph sought to coopt the support of foreign leaders through diplomatic ties. Building on his father's previous establishment of ties with the Khazars,⁹² al-Ma'mūn kept up 'Abbāsīd interest in the powers to the north and on the Byzantine frontier. When the king of the Bulgars wrote to the caliph inquiring about Islam, al-Ma'mūn wrote back a detailed letter addressing the questions,⁹³ no doubt hoping that a connection with the Bulgars would gain him an ally who could then serve to distract the Byzantines from the affairs of Asia Minor, where they were siding with the revolt of Bābak al-Khurramī against the caliphate. In the event, the Bulgars did not fulfill the caliph's hopes right away. They were just beginning their search for a religion with a viable political base on the Mediterranean, and it would take another half century, further crucial contacts with Rome and Constantinople, and another missed embassy by the renowned Ibn Faḍlān, before they would make up their minds. Other diplomatic missions that demonstrated al-Ma'mūn's attention to international affairs included an embassy sent to a king in India named Dahma. Later 'Abbāsīd sources tell us a great deal about this embassy, which probably took place in 825 (AH 210), and provide the full text of the correspondence⁹⁴ and a list of the gifts exchanged between the two rulers, including a Pharaonic cup sent by the caliph to India.⁹⁵

The orderly reunification of the empire under al-Ma'mūn attests to a clear policy of rebuilding the base of government and revitalizing a steady flow of revenue to the capital, and it must have been due to renewed tax collection that the caliph was able in his later years to initiate the program of acquiring a new army of Turkish soldiers. Al-Ma'mūn was as much a careful spender as he was

⁹¹ Geddes, "Al-Ma'mūn's Shi'ite Policy," 107.

⁹² Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 122–23.

⁹³ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 116.

⁹⁴ The earliest extant text of these letters is from the fourth century work of Abū Bakr Muḥammad and Abū 'Uthmān Sa'īd banū Hāshim al-Khālidiyyān, *Kitāb al-Tuḥaf wa'l-Hadāyā*, ed. S. al-Dahhān (Cairo, 1956), 159–68. There are slightly variant later versions given by al-Qādī al-Rashīd, *Kitāb al-Dhakhā'ir*, 21–28; and Ibn Dihya al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Nibrās*, 50–55. See D. M. Dunlop, "A Diplomatic Exchange between al-Ma'mūn and an Indian King" *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies (Essays in Honor of Aziz S. Atiya)*, ed. S. A. Hanna (Leiden, 1972), 133–43. Dunlop finds no reason to doubt the authenticity of these letters, but suggests that the Indian king mentioned is probably the eighth-century Dharma, Dharmapala of Bengal and Bihar (p. 140).

⁹⁵ Dunlop asserts that the Indian king's letter was probably sent around AH 198 to al-Ma'mūn in Khurāsān to congratulate him on his accession. A later date, such as AH 210, is more plausible, however, in light of the fact that some of al-Ma'mūn's gifts came from something called "the Umayyad treasury," which must have been in Baghdad, and in light of the fact that the account of the exchange of embassies is narrated by Aḥmad b. Abī Khālid, who became the caliph's vizir in around AH 210.

a planner. Despite occasional anecdotes about his generosity, al-Ma'mūn seems to have been parsimonious when it came to rewarding talented visitors and, knowing this, poets fled his court to the farthest ends of the earth.⁹⁶ On occasion, the caliph could still throw a lavish spectacle, such as he did during his wedding ceremony to Būrān, the daughter of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl. But such extravagant events were quite rare around the court of al-Ma'mūn due to financial and other reasons. For, during his residence in Baghdad in his middle years, the caliph seems to have kept to himself, staying away from interaction with the public, which probably gave rise to speculation about such matters as his dream of Aristotle and similar esoteric stories. Though like his father al-Ma'mūn tried to cultivate an image of religiosity, he did not do it by undertaking the pilgrimage, as Hārūn had done so frequently, or surrounding himself with traditionalist scholars. Rather, he did this by delving into the speculative dimension of theology, and exploring the connection with science and philosophy. In the end, he succeeded in projecting a messianic image in his own way, and the public must have been divided between those who viewed him as a dubious heretic and those who would see his entry to Baghdad in the year 819 (AH 204) – happening simultaneously with a solar eclipse that nearly hid the sun completely – as a portent of the coming of God's chosen caliph.⁹⁷

Surveying the caliph's various political techniques, we may wonder who guided him in this political planning, particularly in the absence of reputed advisors. We may safely dismiss from the outset the possibility of significant influence from the idealistic portrait of the early Rāshidūn caliphate. An anecdote recounted by Bayhaqī tries to show the caliph as faithful to the Rāshidūn model when he exacts justice even from his son after the complaint of a commoner, in a manner reminiscent of the behavior of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb on similar occasions.⁹⁸ Mas'ūdī also gives a long account, describing a debate between al-Ma'mūn and an itinerant "sufi" who questioned the caliph about the legitimacy of his hold on power. The caliph, we are shown, dealt kindly with this commoner, going as far as telling him that as caliph he thinks of

⁹⁶ Abū Hilāl al-Ḥasan b. 'Abdallāh b. Sahl al-'Askarī, *Kitāb Faḍl al-'Aṭā' 'alā al-'Uṣr*, ed. M. M. Shākir (Cairo, 1934), 64; Ṭabarī quotes the singer 'Allawayh's complaint to the caliph about the sparseness of rewards at the 'Abbāsīd court in comparison with the prosperous status of Ziryāb at the Umayyad court in Spain (Ṭabarī, III, 1150). The failure of some poets to receive rewards from al-Ma'mūn is at other times justified in the sources by referring to the literary weakness of the poetry (Ṭabarī, III, 1159) or by showing that the caliph had personal disputes with the poets in question. Al-Ma'mūn, for example, reportedly refused to accept any panegyric from the poet al-Ḥusayn b. al-Daḥḥāk because the latter had recited poems that praised al-Amin over al-Ma'mūn during the civil war (Abū 'Abdallāh Yāqūt b. Abdallāh al-Ḥamwī, *Muḥam al-Uḍabā'* [Beirut, 1991], 5 vols., III, 129). The success of Ibn Ṭāhir in attracting poets to Nishapur was not all due to the measure of Tāhirid patronage, but was also a result of the lack of a sufficient patronage in Baghdad and Sāmarrā'.

⁹⁷ Ibn A'tham, *al-Futūḥ*, VIII, 424.

⁹⁸ Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin*, 496. There is also a parallel with the story describing 'Umar exacting justice from the son of 'Amr b. al-'Aṣ in favor of a Copt, who was slighted by 'Amr's son. Bahā' al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ibshīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf fī Kull Fann Mustaṭraf* (Beirut, n.d.), I, 129.

himself merely as a caretaker of community affairs, willing to relinquish control to another leader whom the community can agree on any time this becomes possible.⁹⁹ However, the transparent falsity of these anecdotes needs little proving. The orthodox emphasis on the moral restraint on power, and the duty of the ruler to support egalitarianism, equity, and justice in the community above all political interests was objectionable to al-Ma'mūn because it hampered state control. The caliph was a strong believer in the autonomy of political power from communal pressures, and felt that a ruler could not defer to the community, because the majority of people, he believed, were prone to sedition and competition. Thus the anonymous author of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq* reports that, when the caliph once overheard someone bemoaning the loss of the days of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the caliph rebuked the man, saying that, had the community (*ra'īyya*) at his time been as obedient to political authority as the community was to 'Umar, the caliph would have behaved differently.¹⁰⁰ On another occasion, al-Ma'mūn directly asserts his divergence from the ideal Islamic model when he questions the political soundness of the policies of the Rāshidūn. Bayhaqī states that, when the caliph once asked about how Abū Bakr used to manage the affairs of the caliphate, he was told that Abū Bakr used to "take the resources from various sources and distribute them among the needy," to which al-Ma'mūn responded, saying "A Commander of the Faithful cannot afford to do that." He then asked about the policies of 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī, received the same answer, and commented in the same way. Only when he finally asked about Mu'āwiya and was told, "He used to take funds from various sources and dispense with them as he wished," did the caliph deem this behavior wise.¹⁰¹

Although al-Ma'mūn did not advertise his criticisms of Abū Bakr and 'Umar's method of government openly, it was probably clear that he was a more fervent admirer of model Sasanian monarchs. Stable and orderly states for al-Ma'mūn had to be based on a hierarchical structure centered on a ruler with a divine right to rule. Force was necessary to maintain this hierarchical system, to thwart popular movements, and to preserve peace and security in the land. Although important because it was the main identifying characteristic of the caliphate, Islam did not mean the total overturning of social stratification and hierarchical government to al-Ma'mūn. The caliph clarifies this view when he states:

[Social] rank is like genealogy. It binds people together, so that it is more worthwhile for an Arab nobleman (*sharīf al-'arab*) to be in the company of a foreign nobleman (*sharīf al-'ajam*) than to be in that of a plebeian Arab (*waḍī' al-'arab*). And it is more worthwhile for a foreign nobleman to associate with an Arab nobleman than with a foreign plebeian. For the honored among peoples represent a class, much as those of low origins also represent a class (*ashrāfu'l-nās ṭabaqa kamā anna awḍā'ahum ṭabaqa*).¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Murūj*, IV, 315. ¹⁰⁰ *Al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq*, 379.

¹⁰¹ Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsin*, 495.

¹⁰² Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Tadhkira*, II, 71.

This statement, borne out by the caliph's policy of building bridges with the elite families of Khurāsān such as the Sahlids, the Farrkhusraws, and the Samanids during the civil war, echoes a view that runs very close to the principles outlined in the political testament of Ardashīr.¹⁰³

The personality of al-Ma'mūn

The subject of al-Ma'mūn's political planning and thinking inevitably leads to the issue of the caliph's motives and the psychological attitudes that shaped his behavior. Most characterizations of the caliph's personality are framed in anecdotes that allude to aspects of personal morality while addressing issues of religious and political morality. The picture one is likely to glean from the biographical sketches in Dīnawarī, Mas'ūdī, Baghdādī, and even Ṭabarī is that of a ruler who is constantly motivated by noble impulses, one who assumes a virtuous stance even when events get out of hand. Reading through the extensive historical narratives of the Khurāsān and Baghdad phases of the caliph's rule, however, one senses a slow and implicit transformation in the caliph's attitude, and the narrators of these accounts seem to be sketching a more complex portrait of the caliph that goes beyond mere idealization.

A clear change in the way the caliph is represented appears after his return to Baghdad in 819. There we find al-Ma'mūn suddenly behaving in a more confident political style. Al-Ma'mūn is here conscious of state objectives and in control of things. His word consistently drowns other voices at court, while his commanders, such as Tāhir, grow ever more fearful of the caliph and anxious about their futures. This reversal in attitude on the part of officials and their fear can be read in part as a tendentious emotional manifestation, particularly in light of the negative effect soon to affect many commanders' lives. However, this may only be of secondary importance in reading the text. The notable features of this reversal in al-Ma'mūn's behavior alluded to by the chroniclers are not only its punishing effect on his associates, but also the evolving crisis in al-Ma'mūn's personality, and the increasing ambiguity that the observer encounters when he seeks to determine the caliph's motives and his political and moral/religious beliefs.

We may read in the change in behavior an expression of the caliph's frustration and feeling of helplessness toward the hegemony of his associates. Or it is possible instead that al-Ma'mūn was in full command of his affairs all along, and that the sources are trying to portray a double-sidedness in his personality that was always there. We seem to be told that while on the surface al-Ma'mūn caved in to necessary pressures (political, military, public), he

¹⁰³ A similar statement is to be found in the ancient Persian texts *'Ahd Ardashīr*, ed. I. Abbas (Beirut, 1967), 90 and *Kitāb al-Tāj* (attr. Pseudo-Jāhiz), ed. A. Zakī (Cairo, 1914), 24. For another textual linkage between al-Ma'mūn's statements and *'Ahd Ardashīr*, see F. Steppat, "From *'Ahd Ardashīr* to al-Ma'mūn: A Persian Element in the Policy of the Miḥna," *Studia Arabica et Islamica, Festschrift für Ihsan Abbās*, ed. W. Qādī (Beirut, 1981), 451–54.

nevertheless kept his mind set on a particular course of action for which he ultimately aimed.

Yet there is room, too, to read the text as a representation of the caliph as fickle, unpredictable, even treacherous. He could hardly be trusted, and this quality kept on growing to terrifying extents by the end of his reign. The heavy coat of innocence that al-Ma'mūn wears during the murders and assassinations that pave his way to power make one suspicious of the apparent textual intention that the narrative be read straightforwardly. Here we must recognize, however, that narrators are not seeking to write only in a mocking way of the caliph's feigned innocence. Rather, their intention in representing al-Ma'mūn is to broach a wider topic, namely, how to rationalize a political leader's behavior. The complex task facing the audience – the historical actors – is to attempt to draw the boundaries between righteous appearances and calculated realities. There is a paradoxical irony in the docile appearance of al-Ma'mūn, which alludes to a totally opposite inclination beneath the surface. The superficial dichotomy between the seemingly pleasant and virtuous character and the uninviting and awkward one deceives the viewer into an obvious "reading" throughout, and is only subverted on the margins of the plot and towards the end.

After his proclamation as caliph in 813, al-Ma'mūn continues to seem secondary to al-Faḍl b. Sahl as planner of events. While the caliph is constantly present during controversial events, such as the arrest of Harthama b. A'yan and the declaration of 'Alī b. Mūsā's nomination for succession, he is shown to be insulated from the news concerning other provinces, particularly the brewing chaos in Baghdad and even the final effect of events taking place in Khurāsān. (Harthama is murdered after he is taken away from the assembly of the caliph; hence the distance between the caliph and the responsibility for the final result.) The narrative of controversial events builds up in a way that gives the reader hope of finally seeing the direct responsibility of the caliph, but the narrators never specifically declare the caliph's responsibility. When the civil war in Baghdad moves out of the control of the caliph's governors, the narrators categorically join in placing the blame on al-Faḍl b. Sahl, and use other issues to condemn him further. Al-Ma'mūn, we are told, only started to take matters into his own hands when a group of hesitant witnesses told him that al-Faḍl was ruining state affairs, accusing the latter of the murder of Harthama, of the dismissal of Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn from the high command, and of having devious purposes in his nomination of 'Alī b. Mūsā. Only then are we shown the caliph reacting with concern and planning to change course. But the pivotal events that make such a change possible, namely the assassinations of 'Alī b. Mūsā and al-Faḍl, still take place without directly implicating the caliph, however unbelievable this may be.

One narrative that attempts to examine closely the complexity of the caliph's thought process and personality describes a pivotal encounter between al-Ma'mūn and Ṭāhir b. Ḥusayn in 820 (AH 205). Although Ya'qūbī

and Mas'ūdī do not refer to it, Ṭabarī gives this account a central position, citing it as the story behind Ṭāhir's appointment as governor of Khurāsān. The account is worth examining in full for the way it illustrates the ambiguous and secretive dimensions of al-Ma'mūn's personality. The story, recounted on the authority of Bishr al-Marīsī, begins in a nonpolitical context, describing a session of scholarly and religious discussion concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the debates between the Zaydī and Imāmī currents, defended respectively by 'Alī b. al-Haytham and Muḥammad b. al-'Abbās, a member of the 'Abbāsīd family. Soon after they begin arguing, the debate gets derailed when 'Alī b. al-Haytham points out to the caliph some offensive behavior from Ibn al-'Abbās to the memory of the caliph al-Manṣūr. Hearing this, al-Ma'mūn reacts angrily and expels Ibn al-'Abbās from his presence. Seeking to mend fences with the caliph, Ibn al-'Abbās turns to Ṭāhir, asking him to intercede with the caliph to clear the bitterness. Ṭāhir agrees and sets out immediately to see the caliph. Ṭabarī then recounts the crucial encounter between Ṭāhir and the caliph as follows:¹⁰⁴

The servant (*al-khādim*) Faṭḥ used to act as al-Ma'mūn's doorkeeper when the Caliph was involved in his date wine (*nabīdh*) drinking sessions; Yāsir was in charge of the robes of honor; Husayn acted as a cup bearer; and Abū Maryam, the slave boy of Sa'īd al-Jawharī, used to go to-and-fro attending to various needs. Ṭāhir rode up to the palace. Faṭḥ went in and announced, "Ṭāhir is at the door." The Caliph replied, "It isn't one of his usual times, [but] let him come in!" So Ṭāhir entered; he greeted al-Ma'mūn, and the Caliph returned the salutation. The Caliph ordered, "Give Ṭāhir a *raṭl* [of wine] to drink." Ṭāhir took it in his right hand. Al-Ma'mūn said to him, "Sit down!" But he went away [from the circle], drained the cup and then came back. Al-Ma'mūn had meanwhile drunk another *raṭl*, so he ordered, "Give him a second draught!" Ṭāhir behaved exactly as when he drained the first draught. Then he came back, and al-Ma'mūn said to him [again], "Sit down!" Ṭāhir replied, however, "O Commander of the Faithful, it is not fitting for the commander of the guard to sit down in his master's presence." Al-Ma'mūn retorted, "That only applies to public sessions at court [*majlis al-ʿamma*], whereas in private sessions (*majlis al-khāṣṣa*) it is allowable." Bishr continued: Al-Ma'mūn wept, and tears welled up in his eyes. Ṭāhir said to him, "O Commander of the Faithful, why are you weeping, may God never cause your eyes to flow with tears! By God, all the lands have submitted to your rule, all the Muslims have acknowledged you as ruler, and you have achieved your desired object in everything you have undertaken." Al-Ma'mūn replied, "I am weeping on account of a matter which is humiliating to mention and whose concealment is a source of grief. No one is free from some care, so tell me about any pressing need which you may have." Ṭāhir said, "O Commander of the Faithful, Muḥammad b. Abī al-'Abbās has committed a fault, so please pardon his error and show your favor to him." The Caliph replied, "I have this moment received him back into my favor. I have ordered gifts to be awarded to him and I have restored him to his former position. Moreover, were it not for the fact that he is not the sort of person suitable for convivial sessions, I would summon him here to court."

¹⁰⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 1039–43; Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdad*, 15–18; Ibn Aʿtham, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, VIII, 419–20. Trans. in by Bosworth, *HT*, XXXII, 100–4.

Having succeeded in his mission, Ṭāhir left to inform his 'Abbāsid friend, but he was puzzled at why the caliph wept. Suspicious of the reasons for this behavior, Ṭāhir, in turn, sought the help of a lower member of the courtly staff, Hārūn b. Jabghūya, giving him 300,000 dirhams to distribute between two of his servants, Ḥusayn and Muḥammad b. Hārūn, to find out in a discreet way why the caliph wept. At the caliph's meal the next morning, Ḥusayn was in attendance. When the caliph had finished, he asked Ḥusayn to pour him a drink, but the latter said,

No, by God, I won't let you have anything to drink unless you tell me why you wept when Tahir came into your presence." Al-Ma'mūn replied, "O [al-] Ḥusayn, why are you so concerned about this, to the point that you have questioned me about it?" He said, "Because of your grief about that." Al-Ma'mūn replied, "O [al-] Ḥusayn, it is a matter concerning which, if it goes beyond your mouth [literally, 'head'], I shall kill you." Al-Ḥusayn said, "O my lord, when did I ever divulge any of your confidences?" Al-Ma'mūn said, "I called to mind my brother Muḥammad [al-Amīn] and the humiliation which he suffered; the tears suffocated me, and I only found release in copious weeping. But Ṭāhir will not escape that from me which he will find unpleasant."

Armed with this story, the servant quickly informed Ṭāhir, who now realized the gravity of the situation and turned to Aḥmad b. Abī Khālīd al-aḥwal to avert vengeance by asking the caliph to give him some distant provincial appointment. Finally, Ibn Khālīd paid the caliph a visit and wove a prologue to convince the caliph to give Ṭāhir the governorship of Khurāsān.¹⁰⁵ Although the caliph initially rejected the proposition, citing the threat that Ṭāhir might rebel, Ibn Khālīd tried to reassure the caliph by guaranteeing to solve such a problem if it should ever arise. Soon after, the caliph approved the nomination of Ṭāhir as governor of the east.

The account of al-Ma'mūn's encounter with Ṭāhir is organized in a pattern that alludes to several political messages relevant to the previous relationship between the two men. Ṭāhir's intercession on behalf of Ibn al-'Abbās indicates from the outset the disproportionate leverage that he held at court, leading a member of the dynasty to turn to him to seek the caliph's pardon. Ṭāhir is shown as particularly influential here to echo his previous hegemonic record during the civil war, which slowly becomes the central problem addressed by the narrative. This is highlighted when al-Ma'mūn appears surprised when he is told that Ṭāhir was at the door. When the caliph tells the servant, "It is not one of his usual times," he is really addressing the reader more than the servant, and preparing us for a pivotal change that is about to happen in this narrative. The comment suggests that Ṭāhir was claiming excessive freedom in dealing with the court, and that this was about to change. We may here well remember a similar moment in the opening of the narrative describing the beginning of the chill between al-Rashīd and Yaḥyā

¹⁰⁵ In convincing the caliph that Ṭāhir is the right choice for Khurāsān, he points out that the region is susceptible to incursions of Turks, and that the governor appointed at the time (Ghassān b. 'Abbād) was not sufficiently capable of coping with such a danger.

al-Barmakī when the latter reportedly once entered the presence of the caliph without permission. This led Hārūn, then, to ask his doctor, Jibrīl, who was present, in a sarcastic broadside directed at the vizir, whether his servants enter his chamber without permission.¹⁰⁶

The narrative relating to al-Ma'mūn and Ṭāhir then builds into a subtle confrontation between the two men, as the caliph invites Ṭāhir to join him in a drink, and the latter politely refuses. The exchange that occurs over the invitation for a drink harbors a subtle debate over old political problems and latent grudges. Al-Ma'mūn's previous remembrance of al-Amīn and tearful reaction in the midst of a drinking session where Ṭāhir was discussing the pardon of Ibn al-ʿAbbās is out of place in the logical order of the account. The caliph's behavior becomes more meaningful, however, if we accept the symbolic connection between wine-drinking and political settings, and the evocative power of behavior codes. Al-Ma'mūn weeps as he drinks because the color of wine reminds him of the blood of al-Amīn, which instantly brings Ṭāhir into the picture. When the caliph invites Ṭāhir to partake of wine and the latter refuses on the grounds of courtly etiquette, we have more than an exchange of courtesies. Al-Ma'mūn is ordering his commander to accept responsibility for the murder of al-Amīn, and Ṭāhir resists accepting blame for the event.¹⁰⁷ When Ṭāhir cites the inappropriateness of a commander drinking in the presence of the caliph, and the caliph answers that this applies only to public assemblies (*majlis al-ʿamma*), not private ones (*majlis al-khāṣṣa*), we have the further suggestion that what was said about the murder of al-Amīn in public is a different matter from what is known within the circle of *al-khāṣṣa*.

Al-Ma'mūn's acceptance of Ṭāhir's intercession on behalf of Ibn al-ʿAbbās adds another poignant dimension to the problem of regicide and the question of responsibility. Al-Amīn was not pardoned at the end, even though a lesser member of the dynasty is forgiven, and Ṭāhir was again being held responsible for the murder of al-Amīn by virtue of the fact that he was now interceding on behalf of another person, and once again the caliph found no way to resist the commander's preference. When the caliph appoints Ṭāhir to Khurāsān, we recognize the caliph's weakness in relation to his commander. Yet al-Ma'mūn once again is shown not entirely helpless. His acceptance of the momentary political pressures is temporary, and he continues to work toward his long-

¹⁰⁶ Tabarī, III, 667.

¹⁰⁷ The story is illustrative of a literary play on the abstract notion of the "cup of death," which materializes in a wine cup because of the similarity of color and the possibility of killing through poison. It is notable that Bayhaqī preserves a literary fragment that describes al-Ma'mūn ordering a guard to take charge of a political enemy and do away with him. Al-Ma'mūn's words on that occasion were: "*khudhhu ilayka wa-isqihī ka'sa l-mawt*" (Bayhaqī, al-Maḥāsīn, 513). Another usage of the "cup of death" motif occurs in the narratives of al-Mutawakkil's life. After that caliph was murdered in a conspiracy led by his son al-Muntaṣir, we are told by Ibn Abī'l-Dunyā, quoting a certain ʿAbd al-Malik b. Abī Ja'far as saying that he saw al-Mutawakkil in a dream telling al-Muntaṣir, "By the same cup that you handed us you shall drink" (*Murūj*, V, 50). Also see W. L. Hanaway, "Blood and Wine: Sacrifice and Celebration in Manuchihrī's Wine Poetry," *Iran* 26 (1988), 69–80.

term plan which ultimately deludes and overthrows the schemes of his opponents. The caliph may offer Ṭāhir the favor the latter requested, and sound positive about having the commander join him in a drinking session, but his weeping contradicts the tone and content of his speech. Al-Ma'mūn in essence means the opposite of what he is saying. Ṭāhir does not know what is going on, but he senses something wrong in this contradiction, and becomes determined to find out the secret behind this budding enigmatic behavior by al-Ma'mūn.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, it is because Ṭāhir succeeds in decoding this contradiction, and tries to protect himself, that he initiates the plot that will eventually bring about his downfall. Al-Ma'mūn was here aided as much by Ṭāhir's hastiness as by fate.

This narrative showing the caliph still harboring secret feelings about al-Amīn, and pushed by destiny toward remembrance, can be gleaned from another wine narrative provided by Ṭabarī, where clues, motifs, and a careful interface between speech and action also show a strong allusion to the civil war. The story is recounted on the authority of al-ʿAbbās b. Aḥmad b. Abbān al-Qāsim al-kātib, who mentions that al-Ḥusayn b. al-Daḥḥāk related a story to him, saying: 'Allawayh said to me:

"I will tell you about an episode that once happened to me when I would have despaired of continuing in al-Ma'mūn's favor had it not been for his nobility of character. He summoned us, and when the effects of the wine had got a hold of him, he said, 'Sing to me!' Mukhāriq preceded me and started off by singing a melody of Ibn Surayj to a poem by Jarīr,

When I recalled to mind the two monasteries,
where the noise of the domestic fowls and the beating of the wooden
clappers kept me awake,

I said to the party of riders, at a time when we were weary from the journey
"How far is Yabrīn from the gates of the gardens of paradise!"

He related: "I then found myself suddenly having a compulsion to sing at that time, which in fact coincided with al-Ma'mūn's preparations for setting out for Damascus with the intention of proceeding to the [Byzantine] frontier region,

The moment of time has urged [us] on to Damascus, even though
Damascus is no fitting place for our people.

He thereupon dashed his drinking-cup to the ground and exclaimed, 'What's the matter with you? May God's curse be upon you!' Then he said, 'O slave boy, give Mukhāriq three thousand dirhams!' I was taken by the hand and set down in my place, whilst his eyes were overflowing with tears and he was saying to al-Mu'taṣim, 'This is, by God, my last expedition and I don't think that I shall ever see Iraq again.'" He related: "By God, it was indeed his last contact with Iraq, at the time of this expedition, just as he said."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Al-Hasan b. Sahl is also shown to have suspected this double-sidedness in the caliph's behavior (*Murūj*, IV, 327).

¹⁰⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 1162; Bosworth, *HT*, XXXII, 256–57; Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdad*, 175. Ibn Ṭayfūr cites the same chain of transmitters for this story as Ṭabarī.

On its own this story seems to highlight mainly the unlucky aspect that chance can sometimes have, especially when an actor (as the poet does) chooses the wrong verse to recite. The caliph's graciousness and forgiveness, however, ultimately defuse the tension and bring reward to the poet who thus finds a reason to remember the story and tell it to another generation of listeners.¹¹⁰ However, in reality this anecdote was meant to be read in conjunction with a story about al-Amīn we examined earlier, namely the story which I called "al-Amīn by the River." Reading the two together, we notice how both anecdotes center on a wine-drinking session close to the caliph's time of death, in both stories marginal actors (a singer/poet) unwittingly utter ominous words that have a meaning beyond what they suggest to an average audience, and in both the caliphs are shown as the individuals who possess the foresight to recognize what the words really mean. When Mukhāriq sings, "Damascus is no fitting place for our people," al-Ma'mūn understands that Syria, being the Umayyad homeland, could not possibly be a residence for the 'Abbāsids. What, then, could it be? A final resting place – hence he weeps. Thus, just as al-Amīn reached his end when he started thinking about turning to Syria, al-Ma'mūn never returned from Syria to Baghdad alive. Damascus here serves as a literary and historical pun on the intertwined fates of the brothers. But the fundamental tie between the brothers is established more directly and clearly when al-Ma'mūn knocks over his wine cup in anger, just as the singer had done accidentally at the time of al-Amīn. For it is in this evocative moment of wine drinking, revelry, and fateful utterances by a character destabilized through his poetic talent that we hear the allusive historical commentary. Al-Ma'mūn recognizes the lingering shadow of the civil war, drops his cup, resigning to fate and grants the poet 3,000 dirhams, without ever disclosing the connection that he felt unconsciously about al-Amīn, except to suggest to al-Mu'taṣim vague premonition about his imminent end.

Thus in two different ways, in the narrative about Ṭāhir and the anecdote on Damascus, we find the caliph still engaging the memory of the civil war in an introspective, melancholic way. For various reasons, in neither story does he disclose his true feelings about the past, but the very exercise of representation leaves the reader with little doubt as to how the caliph felt. Such oblique frames of representation form the essence of Ṭabarī's compiled narratives, which would be further reworked and connected at a later age by belles-lettres writers out of touch with the original historical context of the caliphal narratives.

The final years

Ṭabarī's representation of a resolute al-Ma'mūn, shedding the trappings of timidity from around 819, squares well with his attempt to show the caliph

¹¹⁰ 'Allawayh apprenticed to Mukhāriq, which made the latter responsible for his actions in courtly assemblies. The caliph's decision to reward Mukhāriq was therefore meant to be understood as a generous gesture that was made despite 'Allawayh's ominous verse.

seeking to assume control over his affairs, and heading toward the reunification of the empire, and a revival of the Byzantine war. His angry correspondence with rebels, such as Naṣr b. Shabath al-'Uqaylī, and emperors, such his letter to Theophilus in 830 (AH 215), shows him now a seasoned politician, who faces challenges decisively. As such, there is a logical maturity in the caliph's personality that runs parallel to his newly advertised political objectives, and even historical record. The era of the Baghdad caliphate forms a rebuttal to the vizirate-dominated era of Khurāsān, and the civil war years. The personal image of the caliph continues to grow as one of a well-reasoned and stable ruler, in the mold of Hārūn and al-Hādī. The episode of the *miḥna*, when the caliph lashes out against the religious scholars who opposed the createdness creed, provides the only glaring exception, in Ṭabarī's chronicle, to the favorable image of the caliph. In the other accounts, however, there are many more incidents that depict not so much the political resolve of the caliph as the increasingly troubled dimension in his personality. Al-Ma'mūn is shown to be easily agitated, and prone to the most hardline position in the face of opposition. The slightest offense triggers his wrath (as in his dismissal of the vizir Aḥmad b. Yūsuf).¹¹¹

During these years, we still encounter remnants of the early idealization of the caliph. It is probably in the latter period of his rule that we have to place an anecdote recounted by al-Zubayr b. Bakkār showing the caliph debating calmly with a zealous religious missionary who faulted the caliph for blocking the public call for "*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*."¹¹² But the story is not a reliable measure of the caliph's behavior, and we should probably look elsewhere. The true colors of al-Ma'mūn came out openly in the way he dealt with the former rebel Ibrāhīm b. 'Ā'isha. Some sources simply gloss over the downfall of Ibn 'Ā'isha as the typical fate of a rebel,¹¹³ but others subvert the temperate posture of al-Ma'mūn by declaring that at the time there was a heated argument between the two men, during which the caliph lost his temper, and ordered the murder of his distant cousin.¹¹⁴

On another occasion, Ya'qūbī describes al-Ma'mūn viciously rebuking the judge Bishr b. al-Walīd for a flogging verdict that he issued regarding a man accused of defaming the caliphs Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Although the issue had not arrived before the caliph because the accused was appealing the verdict, a situation that normally evokes the image of the caliph addressing popular grievances, al-Ma'mūn was very zealous in showing the judge that he had erred technically in the verdict in fifteen ways, and would have punished the judge by flogging were it not for the intercession of other 'ulamā'.¹¹⁵ This story, which is not dated precisely, is recounted by Ya'qūbī along with events of the

¹¹¹ Ibn Ṭīqṭaqā, *al-Fakhrī*, 226. ¹¹² *Muwaffāqiyyāt*, 51–57.

¹¹³ Ṭabarī, III, 1073–74; Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 459.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 99. The author of *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Ḥadā'iq* and Ibn Miskawayh do not refer to the arrest of Ibn 'Ā'isha under the events of the year AH 210, and only examine the story of the surrender of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. ¹¹⁵ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 467–68.

last two years of al-Ma'mūn's reign, when the caliph showed a similar impatience with religious scholars. Ibn Bakkār describes another angry encounter set in Damascus between the caliph and a religious scholar, 'Abd al-A'lā b. Mashar, just before the *miḥna*.¹¹⁶ However, by far the most striking incident in this sphere centers on an argument between al-Ma'mūn and a Mālikī ḥadīth scholar in Egypt. Ya'qūbī states that after putting down the Coptic revolt in Egypt in 831 (AH 216) with great severity, al-Ma'mūn summoned the scholar al-Ḥārith b. Miskīn for religious consultation. When the caliph sought Ibn Miskīn's reassurances that the suppression of the revolt was religiously justifiable, al-Ma'mūn was stunned to hear the scholar scold him for using force, telling him (in one version, on the authority of a statement by Mālik): "If the rebels revolted because of an injustice that was inflicted upon them, then their blood and wealth are inviolable." Al-Ma'mūn was furious to hear this, and lashed out against al-Ḥārith, telling him that both he and Mālik were "men of idiocy" and added, "These [rebels] are unbelievers who are under a covenant (*dhimma*). If they are oppressed, they must address their grievances to the *imām* [caliph] . . . it is not their right to wage war on Muslims in their region." The caliph then ordered al-Ḥārith to be exiled from Egypt to Baghdad, where he was imprisoned and would later face further trials during the *miḥna* the following year.¹¹⁷

This story curiously preserves aspects of the orthodox (particularly Mālik's) hostility to the 'Abbāsīd regime, but its importance here lies in the way it relates to the caliph. The sharpness of al-Ma'mūn's response to the Mālikī scholar certainly counters the caliph's famous reputation for tolerance and temperance. Although eccentric in character and irreconcilable with the orthodox 'Abbāsīd narrative, the anecdote fits well with the image of the caliph's growing exasperation with political and religious opponents alike at the end of his reign. When Yaḥyā b. Aktham, a chief judge and one-time confidant of the caliph, dared to challenge the religious preludes to the *miḥna*, the caliph dismissed him in disgrace and appointed in his place Ibn Abī Du'ād, a junior scholar first introduced to the caliph by Ibn Aktham.

By all accounts, al-Ma'mūn's personality at the end of his reign appears unusually energetic, very tense, and totally different from his early years. His vigorous campaign in Egypt, rapid movement between Irāq, Syria, and Asia Minor, and relentless thrusts against the Byzantines, outdo the resolution shown by his predecessors in carrying on *jihād* or keeping the Byzantines on edge. Just before he crossed into Asia Minor in the summer of 833, al-Ma'mūn had received a last embassy from the Byzantine emperor Theophilus convey-

¹¹⁶ *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 466. Al-Ḥārith, after a trial and years of imprisonment in the *miḥna*, was eventually released upon the lifting of the *miḥna* by the caliph al-Mutawakkil and appointed judge of Egypt until he resigned in AH 245. Dhahabī cites another incident of conflict between the caliph and al-Ḥārith b. Miskīn, which centered on the *faqīh*'s accusation that two of al-Ma'mūn's officials were unjust and corrupt (*Siyar*, XII, 56).

ing a deeply conciliatory offer. The emperor promised the payment of reparations for the damages wrought by previous raids, release of all Muslim captives in Byzantine hands, and the repayment of the caliph for mobilizing that campaign.¹¹⁸ But the offer was swiftly rejected, and the emperor's move to begin his letters respectfully this time, using the caliph's name (instead of the offensive start with his own name), was now found tiresome. All the major military stars of the caliphate were assembled on that campaign, and the caliph seemed poised on a continuous march of conquest. But why was al-Ma'mūn so implacable that year, so persistent against the Byzantines when other threats, like that of the Khurramīs in Azerbaijan were still not over?

It was equally a mystery why the caliph initiated the *miḥna* in Baghdad in that fateful summer when he was far away on the Byzantine frontier preoccupied with war. Did he believe that the enforcement of the new religious policy and particularly the acceptance of the createdness creed would lend the *umma* a sure victory in the final campaign against Constantinople? And that this march of conquest would help affirm the image of a victorious messianic figure in other corners of the empire?

Al-Ma'mūn harbored more than one secret by his final years.¹¹⁹ The diverse political storms that haunted his path to power had left their mark on him by the end and left him in a shattered state. He drank heavily,¹²⁰ cared little for settling in Baghdad, and had become obsessed with gaining a final victory over the Byzantines. One can see in him some echoes of Hārūn's personality toward the end. And perhaps al-Ma'mūn saw in himself something of this shadow, having reached the age at which his father died, and had come to suspect that the end was imminent and that the destiny of caliphs as *imāms* was fatefully connected. But al-Ma'mūn was a complex personality with

¹¹⁸ Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 281.

¹¹⁹ The question of succession to the throne was one of those. Al-Ma'mūn's attitude on this issue remains ambiguous. He had undoubtedly honored his brother al-Mu'taṣim significantly. He had charged him with highly important political tasks such as forming the Turkish army, coordinating the war against the Byzantines, and probably planning the new city of Sāmarrā', and put him in charge of the western provinces – an old 'Abbāsīd way of signaling the first step towards succession. However, al-Mu'taṣim never received any succession title to match that traditional protocol, and until the last days of al-Ma'mūn remained known just as "Abū Ishāq," with no title to give him any succession officiality. From another angle, the caliph's strong sympathies for his son al-'Abbās are equally suggestive. Al-'Abbās had been placed in charge of those most strategic northern provinces in Syria, Iraq, and Asia Minor, and – despite his youth – was given crucial frontline commands on that final Byzantine campaign. The caliph's official plans in that area therefore are deeply ambiguous, and he probably intended to keep things that way to avert any premature rivalry among the various wings of his military coalition. This said, it is not hard to imagine that al-Ma'mūn, like all his predecessors, had a strong paternal bias on this issue, and may have been fairly inclined to al-'Abbās. The tendentious nature of the document of succession that Ṭabarī provides, describing a "transfer" of the succession right to al-Mu'taṣim, further enhances suspicion of al-Mu'taṣim's roots of ascendancy. In the end, it may well be true that al-Mu'taṣim had a hand in plotting the caliph's few moments of illness, and later hurried his death by depriving the caliph's doctors from providing al-Ma'mūn with crucial medical treatment. See Ibn al-Ṣābi', *al-Hafawāt al-Nādira*, 184.

¹²⁰ *Kitāb al-Tāj*, 153.

diverse dimensions of identity – as caliph, philosopher, and Persian monarch – fused in one character, and one is tempted to speculate whether the caliph did not see in himself (or let others imagine) an echo of a more distant and spectacular rival, namely, Alexander the Great. The two were tied by their deference to Aristotle, shared a fascination with ancient Egypt, and even suffered illness in the same icy waters of Ṭarsūs,¹²¹ but for a moment in that final year of his reign, al-Ma'mūn was to see himself in other roles besides that of caliph, vindicating the ancestors and settling an old score between the Persian and Roman worlds. He had come to see himself as the leader who would finally attain the revenge of Darius over Alexander and finish the mission of Islamic conquest at the same time.

¹²¹ P. Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 BC* (Berkeley, 1991), 220. Curiously, al-Ma'mūn also owed the foundation of his first capital, Marw, to Alexander (C. E. Bosworth, “Marw,” *EI*, VI, 618; Abū ‘Abdallāh Yāqūt b. ‘Abdallāh *Muʿjam al-Buldan* 5 vols. (Beirut, 1957), V, 133.

The structure of civil war narratives

How disagreement between the brothers first developed and then evolved into political and military conflict is a question that remains shrouded with mystery. Did al-Amīn commit the first transgression by removing his brother from the succession and replacing him with his own son, Mūsā al-Nāṭiq bi'l-Ḥaqq? Or was it al-Ma'mūn who overreacted to al-Amīn's initial move to nominate Mūsā as second successor by dropping al-Amīn's name from the coinage struck in the east, which in turn led al-Amīn to turn decidedly hostile and to drop his brother from the line of succession altogether? Or was it a third scenario, overwhelmingly favored by the medieval sources, in which the dispute over succession was built on an earlier disagreement that surfaced right after al-Rashīd's death, when al-Amīn sought to assert his central authority over the eastern provinces?

In the document containing the covenant of succession, the Mecca Protocol, we are told that Hārūn al-Rashīd designated al-Ma'mūn as autonomous ruler over the eastern provinces stretching from Rayy to Khurāsān. All the financial, military, and administrative affairs in the region were to fall solely under the jurisdiction of al-Ma'mūn, while al-Amīn was to rule the westerly parts of the empire, refraining entirely from asserting any measure of sovereignty over the east. The document strictly forbade any violation of the territorial division, and outlined severe penalties against either party seeking to meddle in the other's zone. Read against the ornately detailed clauses of the Protocol, the attempts by al-Amīn to control the east surely look like a violation. But the matter hinges on our acceptance of the Protocol as authentic. I have argued elsewhere that the authenticity of the extant Protocol is highly suspect.¹ The text of the covenant is so disproportionately favorable to al-Ma'mūn that it reflects more the outcome of the war than some excessive parental inclination toward al-Ma'mūn on the part of al-Rashīd.² The

¹ T. El-Hibri, "Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Mecca Protocol of 802: A Plan for Division or Succession," *IJMES*, 24 (1992).

² Traditional scholarship has generally accepted the authenticity of this document. See Gabrieli, "Successione," 346–47; Sourdel, *Le Vizirat abbaside*, I, 151–52; Shaban, *Islamic History*, II, 39–40; and Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 123–27. R. Kimber also builds on these studies

Protocol contains detailed clauses covering areas of political, military, and administrative affairs that too conveniently turned out to be the exact matters of contention between the brothers. Even a jewel that al-Amīn seized from his brother's household in Baghdad during the war is safely guarded by mention in the Protocol!³

Without doubt al-Rashīd made a pilgrimage in 802 with the main intention of arranging the issue of caliphal succession. In Mecca in that year, in the presence of all the dignitaries of the 'Abbāsīd state, the caliph declared the official line of succession to the 'Abbāsīd house. Al-Amīn was to succeed first, while al-Ma'mūn would follow. And to avoid leaving the second heir apparent idle for the duration of al-Amīn's reign, al-Rashīd at this time designated al-Ma'mūn as governor of the frontier province of Khurāsān–Transoxiana. By assigning such a high-ranking member of the 'Abbāsīd ruling elite to Khurāsān, a person who was significantly half-Iranian, al-Rashīd sought to appeal to eastern cultural sympathies, to solidify frontier loyalty to the caliphate, and to preserve the province against the appeal of local rebels and interventionist plots from Transoxiana and farther afield. Despite the political importance of al-Ma'mūn's military role, however, al-Ma'mūn was to remain a provincial governor, subject in all final decisions to Baghdad. If we consider that only three years later, the caliph devised a similar arrangement by designating his other son, al-Mu'taman, as governor-general of the equally troubled western frontier provinces of al-Thughūr, al-Jazīra, and al-'Awāṣim, we can see how the designation of these two heirs to roles of provincial leadership was part of a new caliphal strategy for bolstering the defenses of the 'Abbāsīd frontiers. Hārūn had clearly grown weary by the middle part of his reign with the performance of traditional governors, and was now creating a militaristic type of governorate borrowed straight from the Byzantine book of strategies, something resembling the system of exarchates, used to hold back barbarian threats to the heartland of the empire.

Even if we were to accept the dubious nature of the extant text of the Protocol, and adjust our view of the original nature of al-Ma'mūn's appointment in the east, reading Ṭabarī and the other chronicles still leaves us with considerably long narratives of the political events spanning the years 810–13 (AH 194–98) which outline in selective detail the course of escalation of the conflict. Ṭabarī's annalistic work bulges with testimonies that recount in detail political discussions which took place in the 'Abbāsīd courts (both in Baghdad and Marw), correspondence between the brothers, and descriptions of battle scenes.⁴ Much of this material tends to be elusive in meaning and intent.

footnote 2 (cont.)

in arguing that al-Rashīd even sought to enhance al-Ma'mūn's position further toward autonomy if not to make him his primary heir: R. A. Kimber, "Hārūn al-Rashīd's Meccan Settlement of AH 186/AD 802," *University of St. Andrews, School of 'Abbāsīd Studies, Occasional Papers* 1 (1986), 55–79. ³ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 436.

⁴ Gabrieli accepted these letters as remnants of a lost chancery ("Successione," 342).

Letters exchanged between the brothers, which we presume should address the issues of dispute, often take off in abstract directions. Their style of composition is more allusive than descriptive, and their thrust is more moral than political. One wonders whether there ever was a different set of letters that contained a more realistic description of the dispute. What the purpose of the extant letters and the narrative of the conflict might be is the question we will turn to next.

The narratives describing the escalation of civil war in the chronicles are hardly a cohesive set of literary material that speaks in a unidirectional voice. An assemblage of divergent testimonies, the majority of which are of anonymous origin, these reflect a diverse set of opinions on the characters of the brothers, the reasons for the civil war, and the moral lessons of it. The towering voice amid these narratives is that which defends al-Ma'mūn's defiance of the caliph and accuses the latter of instigating trouble.⁵ Al-Amīn is shown, from the very last days of al-Rashīd's life, as plotting to break the Protocol. He first secretly ordered al-Faql b. al-Rabī' to return to Baghdad with the eastern army right after al-Rashīd died. Then, not satisfied with stripping his brother of badly needed military resources, deemed al-Ma'mūn's right under the Protocol, al-Amīn began to meddle in the administration of Khurāsān, writing to al-Ma'mūn to ask him to relinquish some districts (*kuwar*) of Khurāsān and to accept financial agents sent from Baghdad as well as a postal agent, who would write to the caliph about the conditions in al-Ma'mūn's region.⁶ Despite this transgression, al-Ma'mūn is shown as restrained, continuing to argue the matter diplomatically on the grounds of the unfairness of the demand. In another version describing the second step of transgression, Ṭabarī states that al-Amīn wrote to al-Ma'mūn asking him to return to Baghdad because, the caliph stated, he needed to have him close by for consultation on critical state decisions, and that al-Ma'mūn again diplomatically declined the offer by saying, "Upon my life, my remaining here will be more profitable for the Commander of the Faithful and more useful to the Muslims than my going to the Commander of the Faithful, although I would be happy to be in his presence and glad to see God's favor toward him."⁷

Al-Amīn, according to these scenarios, is the main culprit in the conflict, while his advisors are shown as desperately trying to change his mind to no avail. When he first revealed to them his intention to depose al-Ma'mūn from succession, al-Amīn immediately faced their opposition. One of his advisors, Khuzayma b. Khāzim, told him, "Commander of the Faithful, anyone who lies to you is not giving you sincere advice, and anyone who speaks the truth to you is not deceiving you. Do not embolden the military commanders to depose, lest they depose you; and do not induce them to break the compact,

⁵ For an outline of the political events of the war, see Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 135–48, Daniel, *Political and Social History*, 175–82; S. Samadī, "The Struggle between the Two Brothers al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn," *Islamic Culture* 36 (1962), 99–120; Gabrieli, "Successione," 341–97. ⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 780. ⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 817. Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 73.

lest they break their compact with you and their allegiance to you; for the treacherous man is abandoned, and the perfidious man is defeated.”⁸ The vizir al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ in this anti-caliphal context is also shown exasperated with the recklessness and frivolity of the caliph and unable to instill sense into him,⁹ while only the chief leader of the Abnāʾ, ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā, encourages the caliph to press ahead with the attack on Khurāsān.¹⁰

Within the framework of this representation, the image of al-Maʾmūn is the reverse of that of al-Amīn. At the very time when the latter is devising his unprovoked aggression, al-Maʾmūn is shown fearfully receiving the initial commands from Baghdad. With his family stranded in Baghdad and little organized military backing in Khurāsān, al-Maʾmūn is shown as a disenfranchised prince left to the drifts of fate, with slim chances for success. He complains in panic to al-Faḍl b. Sahl, saying:

How can I defy Muḥammad [al-Amīn], when the greater part of the commanders are with him, and when most of the money and stores have gone to him, not to mention the benefits that he has distributed among the people of Baghdad? People incline toward money and are led by it, they do not care about maintaining allegiance or desire to fulfill a covenant or a trust . . . I see nothing else to do than abandon my position and join Khāqān, the king of the Turk, asking him for protection in his country.¹¹

Unable to defy the caliph openly lest he appear rebellious, al-Maʾmūn, Ṭabarī tells us, followed Ibn Sahl’s advice, who strengthened his will by saying:

When suspicion has arisen, caution is in order. I fear Muḥammad’s [i.e., al-Amīn’s] treachery and am apprehensive that he may covet what you have in your hands. It is better for you to be with your soldiers and your strength, residing amid the people of your governorate. If something befalls you from him, you shall gather forces against him and strive to overcome him in battle by strategy . . . Death is less grievous than the anguish of humiliation and injury. I do not think you should leave and go to obey Muḥammad, stripped of your commanders and soldiers, like a head separated from its body, for him to pass judgement over you, so that you become one of his subjects without exerting yourself in striving and fighting. Rather, write to Jabghūya and Khāqān. Give them charge over their lands. Promise them that you will strengthen

⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 809; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 65. The story is told by an anonymous *khādīm* of Muḥammad. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī made an identical admonishment toward the caliph al-Hādī when the latter sought to remove his brother Hārūn from succession in favor of his own son Jaʿfar, who was still a second heir apparent (Ṭabarī, III, 575).

⁹ The frustration of al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ surfaces in a story recounted under the annals of AH 196 when the vizir bitterly complained to a confidant during the war, and said:

Abū al-Hārith, you and I are running towards a goal such that if we fail to reach it, we shall be blamed; yet if we exert ourselves to attain it, we shall be cut off. We are branches from a [single] root: if it thrives, we thrive; if it weakens, we weaken. This fellow has abandoned himself to fate like a foolish slave girl. He takes counsel with women and pursues dreams. The pleasure seekers and reckless men who are with him have gained his ear. They promise him victory and make him expect a good outcome, while destruction is coming toward him faster than a torrent toward a sandy plain. I fear, by God, that we shall perish when he perishes and be destroyed when he is destroyed. (Ṭabarī, III, 833–35; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 92–94)

¹⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 810. ¹¹ Ṭabarī, III, 814–15; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 70–72.

them in fighting the kings . . . Then strike cavalry with cavalry and infantry with infantry. If you win [well and good]; if not, you will be able to join Khāqān as you wish.¹²

It was on the basis of al-Faḍl's advice that al-Ma'mūn drafted the letter reported above, in which he declined the caliph's invitation to return to Baghdad.¹³ Another account of al-Ma'mūn's discussion with al-Faḍl states that the resulting letter, which al-Ma'mūn asked al-Faḍl to write to the caliph, ran as follows:

I have received the letter of the Commander of the Faithful in which he requests the relinquishment of certain specified places – part of what al-Rashīd established in the agreement and whose command he granted to me. No one will transgress the greater part of what the Commander of the Faithful has thought best. However . . . my being in my present situation of looking down on an enemy of fearful strength, with a populace not to be conciliated from its unruliness and soldiers whose obedience can only be obtained by money and a good deal of largesse, the Commander of the Faithful's interest would be enough to cause him to devote much of his attention to the matter.¹⁴

Whichever of the above two versions of al-Ma'mūn's letter we consider, we find that al-Ma'mūn's tone in both is defensive, and apologetic, and each shows him trying his best to remain loyal to his suzerain. Each shows, too, that it was al-Amīn who was leaving no room for dialogue and reasoned argument. Angered by al-Ma'mūn's procrastination in carrying out orders, al-Amīn, we are shown, now blew the matter out of proportion, unfairly accusing his brother of mutiny and disloyalty to the caliphal interests. Al-Amīn wrote: "I have received your letter, in which you show ingratitude for God's favor toward you . . . and where you expose yourself to the burning of a fire you cannot control. Indeed, your disinclination to obey [me] was more tolerable [than your ingratitude toward God]. If some previous request proceeded from me, its grounds were none other than your benefit."¹⁵ Al-Amīn's accusation of al-Ma'mūn that in challenging the caliph he was showing his ingratitude to God (i.e., insinuating the equivalence between caliphal and divine will) is deliberately crafted to show the growth in al-Amīn's political conceit, which not only put him on par with Hārūn's when the latter abused the Barmakids – and in the process appropriated Qur'ānic discourse sealing his decree – but now put al-Amīn on the edge of a path of downfall. Once again, al-Amīn is shown caught in the hubristic trap of Hārūn, as he falls under the illusion that he can do anything he wants without accountability or temperance.

In all, some six letters were exchanged between the two brothers. Unfortunately, neither the letters nor the narrative of the genesis of the disagreement are organized sequentially. While, for example, the initial letter from al-Amīn to al-Ma'mūn is included under the events of the year AH 194, together with the texts of letters exchanged when problems had mounted, the

¹² Tabarī, III, 815–16; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 71–72.

¹³ Events recounted under the year AH 195.

¹⁴ Tabarī, III, 782; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 782.

¹⁵ Tabarī, III, 785; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 34.

initial letter in which al-Ma'mūn declines al-Amīn's invitation to Baghdad is furnished under the events of the year AH 195. Furthermore, while most of the letters are included under the events of AH 194, the discussion that took place in al-Ma'mūn's court, particularly the debate with al-Amīn's envoys, which must have taken place before the sending of the letters, also makes a tardy appearance in AH 195. Repetition also forms a key aspect of this narrative. In one case the initial context of disagreement between the brothers is repeated in two different styles, in AH 194 and 195. It is as if the year AH 195 represented no more than extra space for the chronicler to include a greater variety of accounts of the turning point in the dispute that took place in AH 194. Judging from the abundance of testimonies, one can see that the dispute was a popular one with narrators, who put all their skills into building it into a tension-filled narrative. The various versions produced as a result were as appealing as they were difficult to compare, and Ṭabarī must have found it best to present all these stories under different years, even if they were contradictory.

Where did the popularity of this scenario of civil war come from? The answer to this question has to be cast in light of broader questions about the perception of the ties between the central lands and Khurāsān in 'Abbāsīd historiography. One direct frame of influence for this plot of fraternal conflict can perhaps be discerned in the earlier picture of tension between al-Rashīd and al-Hādī upon the death of al-Mahdī. The generally accepted outline of that earlier story describes how al-Mahdī had set out with the imperial army in 785 (AH 169) accompanied by the second heir presumptive, Hārūn. Meanwhile, al-Hādī, who held the rights to the first succession, despite the wavering feelings of his father about the order of succession, had sallied forth to Jurjan with an army on an expedition. The staging order already bears resemblances to Hārūn's final days.

Under mysterious circumstances al-Mahdī died, leaving Hārūn in full command of massive financial and military resources. If he had so wanted, the narratives insinuate, Hārūn could have seized the caliphate then and there, leaving al-Hādī in a hopeless situation. Hārūn, however, did not take advantage of the situation. After first consulting with Yaḥyā al-Barmakī, he wrote al-Hādī a humble letter of condolence and congratulation on his accession, dispatched the insignia of the caliphate, and reaffirmed his oath of allegiance. Meanwhile, Hārūn hid the matter from the troops, lest they rally around him, and clamor for an immediate return to Baghdad, until the news reached al-Hādī. Once the ceremonial steps were taken, Hārūn returned to Baghdad with the main army, paid the troops for the duration of the upcoming two years, and awaited al-Hādī's return. Hārūn's actions had skirted an opportunity for civil war.¹⁶

The situation of this narrative may seem remote from that of al-Amīn and

¹⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 545–47.

al-Ma'mūn, but in reality it is not, neither in its moral tie nor in its literary linkage. In both the story of al-Hādī and al-Ma'mūn there is great concern about how the rank-and-file soldiers are prone to panic, worry about their pay when the caliph dies, and seek to return to their families in Baghdad during uncertain times. Hārūn is capable of appeasing them without exploiting the situation as both al-Faḍl and al-Amīn do later on. More importantly, but less obviously, a connection is meant to be established between al-Ma'mūn and al-Rashīd as well as al-Hādī. Al-Ma'mūn consults with al-Faḍl b. Sahl, the protégé of the Barmakids, just as Hārūn does in asking Yaḥyā's advice, and both provide sound advice in the matter.¹⁷ Both Hārūn and al-Ma'mūn also show a lack of political interest in those respective similar situations. Both personalities are also cast as the second heirs to whom the deceased caliph was so inclined that he almost changed the succession in their favor.¹⁸ Whether because historical circumstances necessitated it or because there was an artistic element involved, narrators broke up the linkages between the two pairs in a way that prevents one from establishing direct lines of correspondence in roles. With a little attention to the use of inversion in the narrative strategy along with other points of parallelism, one can see how the origin of the Amīn–Ma'mūn conflict was the fulfillment of an aborted plot at an earlier time. This overflow from one earlier political and moral situation to a later one for which we then get not only a flurry of documentation (letters, covenants, debates) but also the very undoing of the caliphate of al-Manṣūr leaves open broader questions about the place of both stories in the plot of caliphal history.

The civil war as a problem of vizirs

Despite the focus in the chronicles on faulting al-Amīn for generating the hostility, one cannot overlook the fact that, on another level of representation, the text seems to minimize the role of the brothers, particularly al-Amīn, in heading for conflict, and instead shifts the blame to the vizirs.¹⁹ An early report describing the origin of the dispute in AH 194 singles out al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī' as the original instigator of the tension. Ṭabarī states this view succinctly when he declares that, after al-Faḍl b. Rabī' left Ṭūs and broke the promise,

that al-Rashīd had made him give to his son 'Abdallāh [al-Ma'mūn], al-Faḍl took thought. He realized that, if the caliphate ever devolved upon al-Ma'mūn in his own lifetime, the latter would not allow him to survive; if he gained power over him, it would be his downfall. So he strove to incite Muḥammad against 'Abdallāh. He urged him to

¹⁷ See pp. 145–46 above, Yaḥyā's comment to al-Hādī.

¹⁸ Al-Ma'mūn, of course, was not in command of the caliph's army as al-Amīn's minister, al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī', was. However, al-Ma'mūn faithfully followed the steps that his father had taken in terms of writing a kind condolence letter and reaffirming the oath of allegiance.

¹⁹ Kennedy places emphasis on the role of the vizirs: *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 136. See also D. Sourdel, "Faḍl b. Sahl," *EI*, II, 731.

depose him and to divert the succession to his own son Mūsā. This had not been Muḥammad's plan or intention. His intention, according to what has been mentioned about him, was to carry out for his brothers 'Abdallāh and al-Qāsim the promises and stipulations that his father had caused him to make to them. Al-Faḍl kept on disparaging al-Ma'mūn in his eyes and recommending that he be deposed. Finally, al-Faḍl said, "What are you waiting for in the matter of 'Abdallāh and al-Qāsim, your brothers? The oath of allegiance was to you first, before the two of them". . . Al-Faḍl brought into the affair those whose opinion was on his side – 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān, al-Sindī, and others in his entourage – and he caused Muḥammad to change his mind.²⁰

Viewed in light of this statement, al-Amīn comes across as inexperienced in political affairs, much like his brother in Khurāsān. Whatever aggravation al-Amīn brought al-Ma'mūn, it is claimed, occurred because he was following a policy charted by the vizir and his cohorts. The exculpatory tenor of this passage may lead the reader to wonder whether al-Amīn was even aware of what al-Faḍl wrote on his behalf to Khurāsān. The critical role of the vizir in encouraging a belligerent policy becomes even more pronounced when we examine the significance of al-Faḍl b. Sahl's role at al-Ma'mūn's court. There, the sources concur, al-Faḍl had complete mastery over the situation, advising al-Ma'mūn to resist the demands of al-Amīn and promising to recruit for the young prince a new base of political and military support. When an envoy of al-Amīn, al-'Abbās b. Mūsā b. 'Īsā, for example, tried to reconcile al-Ma'mūn to deposition, telling him, "Why make a great deal of the matter, commander? Consider the story of my grandfather, 'Īsā b. Mūsā. He was deprived of succession, and yet he was not bothered by it,"²¹ al-Faḍl, we are told, became furious and fearful that al-Ma'mūn might concede. Thus he intervened and cried to al-'Abbās, "Be Silent! Your grandfather was a prisoner in their hands, whereas this man is among his maternal uncles and his partisans."²²

More than anyone, al-Faḍl b. Sahl advised the caliph on the strategy for war, and recommended an alliance with neighboring eastern princes, such as Khāqān, with whom al-Ma'mūn could find refuge in case of defeat.²³ When it became clear that the rift between the brothers had deepened, al-Faḍl, we are told, mischievously warned al-Ma'mūn that, now that the disagreement had begun and the two parties were on the brink of war, al-Ma'mūn should forget about entertaining any ideas of reconciliation. As he told al-Ma'mūn, "Do not stop on any account until you are saluted as caliph, for it has become your due. We can no longer accept someone proposing reconciliation, saying, 'Let there be a peaceful accord between the brothers' (*la na'man an yuqāl yuṣlah bayna l-akhawayn*)."²⁴ Crafty as any vizir the caliphate had ever witnessed, al-Faḍl, Ṭabarī states, had planted a spy in al-Amīn's advisory council who was specifically instructed to push the caliph to war and to advise him to place 'Alī

²⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 776–77; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 22–23. See also Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, 389; *al-'Uyūn wa'l-Hadā'iq*, 321–23. ²¹ Ṭabarī, III, 778; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 26.

²² Ṭabarī, III, 778; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 26. ²³ Ṭabarī, III, 815.

²⁴ Partly drawing on Fishbein's translation. Ṭabarī, III, 802; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 31, 55.

b. ʿĪsā b. Māhān in command of the army that would be sent against al-Maʾmūn. Al-Faḍl, the account continues, especially favored seeing ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā in command of al-Amīn's army, knowing how deeply resented this figure was in Khurāsān after his years of gubernatorial tenure there. The reasoning here ran that by having him in command of the caliph's army, the Khurāsānīs would then rally around al-Maʾmūn with greater zealousness and defend him to their utmost against the caliph.²⁵

This highlighting of the innocence of the brothers also manifests itself in stylistic aspects of the narrative. On occasion, a type of literary symmetry exists in the organization of discussions between al-Maʾmūn and al-Faḍl b. Sahl, on the one hand, and al-Amīn and al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ and other advisors, on the other. When al-Amīn, for example, first proposed bringing his brother under his control and possibly removing him from the succession, we are told that his advisors tried to mitigate the abruptness of this policy change toward al-Maʾmūn by suggesting a method for luring the latter to Baghdad. One advisor proposed, "If the Commander of the Faithful thinks he should be deposed, do not announce it openly, lest [important] people disapprove and the ordinary troops regard it as unseemly. Rather, summon one body of troops after another and one commander after another, pacifying each with kindnesses and gifts."²⁶ The "if . . . then" form of declaration that governs the literary construction in the advisor's response seems to have been the favored form of address on al-Maʾmūn's side as well. When al-Maʾmūn considered the various possible responses to al-Amīn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl, we are told, responded in a similar fashion. Al-Maʾmūn started out by describing how al-Amīn was putting pressure on him at the most inopportune time, as neighboring Transoxanian kingdoms were beginning to flex their muscles against the caliphate. Seeking to reassure al-Maʾmūn, al-Faḍl said, "Commander . . . I do not think you should leave your position and go to obey Muḥammad . . . Rather, write to Jabghūya and Khāqān . . . Promise them you will strengthen them in fighting the kings. Send to the king of Kābul some gifts and precious things from Khurāsān . . . Gather your outlying provinces to yourself, and attach to yourself those of your troops who have become separated. Then strike cavalry with cavalry."²⁷ The "exception" form of speech (*wa lākin*, translated as "rather") becomes somewhat dimmed in the process of translation. A cursory look at the Arabic text, however, quickly shows that a similar pattern of discourse and methodic listing of steps occurs on both sides. One might think that such forms of speech were inevitable in a specific context, but the resemblance raises serious suspicion that what we have here are fragments of text produced by narrators living in the same intellectual environment in Baghdad, rather than being faithful preservations of statements pronounced in different corners of the empire.

²⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 808. ²⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 791. Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 40.

²⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 815–16; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 72.

On the historiographical level, the symmetrical construction of the deliberations on both sides points to a significant implication being made by the narrative structure – namely, that the brothers were being pushed to war by those around them. Symmetry here is intended primarily to enhance anxiety on the part of the reader, who recognizes how the brothers are being pushed down the path of tragedy by ambitious politicians on both sides. If only the brothers had recognized this and made more independent decisions, the moral contained in this style seems to be, war could have been averted.

Symmetry and purpose in the narrative

Symmetry remains a guiding frame for much of the description of the escalation of the conflict. Reckless behavior on the part of al-Amīn contrasts with distinctly wise behavior from al-Ma'mūn. And when discussions in al-Amīn's court seem to center on the most effective methods for deceiving al-Ma'mūn – luring him to Baghdad and usurping his rights with minimal military cost – the discussion in al-Ma'mūn's court centers on the importance of adhering to moral principles and the need to maintain commitment to one's position and rights, lest compromise lead to a more drastic infringement on more crucial matters. In the narrative of the civil war, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn stand more as symbolic devices than as real historical figures. Their disagreement after al-Rashīd's death conveniently summarizes the longstanding rift between the caliphate and Khurāsān that spanned the entire second century (AH). The story of the conflict between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn is essentially the story of the troubled relation between the eastern provinces and the central government. All the questions that haunted the relation between the caliphs and their governors of Khurāsān are repeated in al-Amīn's and al-Ma'mūn's time with an almost annoying persistence too marked to be real. Where do provincial tax revenues belong: in the caliphal treasury in Baghdad or in the province? How should central administrators relate to provincial notables, and to what extent should the caliphate monitor the internal affairs of the province (whether officials from the capital would be appointed to the province)?²⁸ All of these questions, which eventually were settled in a way advantageous to Khurāsān when al-Ma'mūn placed the Tāhirids as hereditary governors of Khurāsān, were still hotly contested on the eve of al-Rashīd's death.

The diplomatic narratives

Various narratives, letters, and debate that are represented as forming a part in the civil war story largely represent commentaries on this troubled relation between Baghdad and Khurāsān now coming to a head. This commentary can be elusive when it is couched in ethical and abstract terms, such as in a letter from al-Ma'mūn to al-Amīn:

²⁸ Kennedy, *Prophet*, 145–47.

The letter of the Commander of the Faithful has reached me . . . I will reveal to him the true state of affairs . . . Two rivals go beyond a state of equal sharing only when equal sharing is insufficient for those who hold to it. When did someone ever depart from it while it was enough for everyone, and the departure resulted only in breaking with it and suffering what lay in its abandonment?²⁹

The same intention of providing an apologetic for provincial autonomy is at other times communicated nearly explicitly. A key instance of this appears in a dialogue between al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ and a man whom al-Faḍl thinks is an ally. The man, a Khurāsānī whose name is not mentioned, made his appearance in Baghdad as a Khurāsānī turncoat willing to offer Ibn al-Rabīʿ free advice on how to deal with the crisis with al-Maʾmūn. In reality, this anonymous man, we are told elsewhere, was a spy of Ibn Sahl, who had entrusted him with sowing discord in al-Amīn's court. The account narrated by Sahl b. Hārūn describes how al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ summoned this man for consultation before starting the war. The man began by advising Ibn al-Rabīʿ about the merit of remaining faithful to the covenant of succession, but this exhortation was no more than a token of Maʾmūnid deference to peaceful means. Knowing the vizir was adamant on breaking the promise and preparing for war quickly, the spy then moved on to explain the disadvantages (particularly to Baghdad) of pursuing such a war.³⁰ When al-Faḍl declared his intention to break the oath of the succession covenant, the man cautioned against doing such a thing, for it would weaken their allegiance to the caliph. Al-Faḍl quickly followed up by saying, "If we disregard what the populace (*al-ʿamma*) say and find helpers in our partisans (*shīʿatina*) and our soldiers, what would you say?" "There is no obedience," the man said, "unless one has firm inner conviction." Al-Faḍl said, "We will awaken their desire by improving their fortunes (*nuraghghibuhum bi-tashrifī huḏūḏihim*)."

"Then," said he, "they will accept at first, but then abandon you when you need their loyalty (*idhan yaṣīrū ilā al-taqabbul thumma ilā khidhlānika ʿinda ḥājatika ilā munāṣaḥatihim*)."

Al-Faḍl said, "What is your opinion about ʿAbdallāh's soldiers?" "They are men," he said, "who have enthusiasm for their enterprise because of their longstanding effort and the important affair they are engaged in together."

Al-Faḍl said, "What is your opinion of their common people? (*fa-mā ḡannuka bi-ʿammatihim*)?" "They are men," he said, "who were in great distress because of mistreatment. Because in their property and persons have come through him to their desire as regards property and to easy circumstances of life, they are defending prosperity that is newly come to them, and they remember tribulation, to which they fear a return (*qawmun kānū fī balwā ʿaḏīmatin min taḥayyuf wulātihim fī amwālihīm thumma fī anfusihīm*)."

Al-Faḍl asked, "Is there no way to corrupt the loyalty of the great men of the land to rebel

²⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 784–85; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 33.

³⁰ Given the nature of this man's mission, one is inclined not to view him as seeking to play the role of reconciler, but rather as encouraging the caliph's vizir to make decisions that would put al-Maʾmūn's side at an advantage.

against him, so that our battle with him could be [by the intrigue of his side], not by marching toward him to do battle with him?" He replied, "As for the weak, they have come to love him because of the security and fair treatment they have obtained from him, while the powerful have found nothing to censure and no ground for argument; and the weak are the great majority." Al-Faḍl said, "I think you have left us no room to believe that we should go to fight his soldiers . . . (*mā arāka abqayta lanā mawḍi' ra'yin fī i'tizālīka ilā ajnādīnā wā la tumakkin al-naẓar fī nāḥiyatihi bi-iḥtiyālīna* . . .) but the Commander of the Faithful is not content to abandon what he knows to be his right, nor am I satisfied with peace, given the progress that has occurred in his enterprise."³¹

This passage manifests a defensive voice for the Khurāsānī movement of al-Ma'mūn. The anonymous speaker idealizes the moral commitment of the populace and explains clearly the reasons for Khurāsānī solidarity in light of the decades-old background of abuse from the 'Abbāsīd administration. Since a lengthy declarative statement on this topic (Khurāsān's history with the caliphate) would have been difficult and unaesthetic to present, whether on its own or as part of a story, the narrator skillfully broke up the explanation into parts (historical, social, provincial, and comparative), weaving the individual statements into a dialogue. The discussion's dubious historicity and moralizing thrust can be gleaned from the carefully crafted nature of its sentences, which often end in rhyme. The text bears a similarity to stories preceding the confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims in the early Islamic period. In the way al-Faḍl openly shows ignorance of the enemy and a willingness to learn about him, and in the way the anonymous man provides short, aphoristic, and decisive insights about the Khurāsānīs and their unstoppable tide, we find an analogy to those situations in early Islam when the imperial enemy (Byzantine,³² Sasanian, or Chinese³³) often expressed a similar interest in learning about the hitherto unknown Arab armies. Baffled by their successive defeats by an enemy that was fewer in number but stronger in will, monarchs and commanders were often shown questioning an ambassador, a prisoner of war, or a neutral spy in the same way and receiving an ominous answer that highlights the moral contrast between the warring powers.³⁴

This dialogical display of the Khurāsānī point of view surfaces also in a discussion in Marw. When the caliph contemplated how to respond to al-Amīn's initial demands on Khurāsān, al-Ma'mūn, we are told, summoned his various advisors, and asked them their opinion on what he should do. Several opinions were then voiced, including those who recommended acquiescence due to the uncertainty involved with war. Then pointing to the primacy of the

³¹ Ṭabarī, III, 792–93; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 42–43.

³² Ṭabarī, I, 1563–64, 2395. ³³ Ṭabarī, I, 2691.

³⁴ For examples of this, see Pseudo-Māwardī, *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, ed. Fu'ād 'Abd al-Mun'im Aḥmad (Alexandria, 1988), 389.

opinion of the Banu Sahl at this stage, al-Ma'mūn turned to al-Ḥasan and asked him to debate these views. So al-Ḥasan approached them and said:

Do you know that Muḥammad has overstepped the bounds to ask for something that is not his by right?" "Yes," they said, "and it should be tolerated because of the harm that we fear refusing it [would cause]." He said, "Are you confident that he will stop after al-Ma'mūn gives him these [districts], and will not go on to ask for others?" "No," they said, "but perhaps peace will transpire before what you fear and expect." He said, "But if, after asking for these districts, he asks for more, do you not think that al-Ma'mūn will have become weak because of what he has given up willingly?" They said, "We shall ward off what may befall him later by putting off the danger that lies immediately at hand." This he said is contrary to the maxim we have heard of the sages who lived before us. They said, "Seek to make your future affairs thrive by bearing whatever hardship befalls you today, but do not seek peace today at the cost of exposing yourself to the danger tomorrow." [Al-Faḍl then added:] "*Commander . . . Can one avoid fearing that Muḥammad may be asking you for your excess strength in order to gain backing to oppose you in the future? Does a prudent man pursue an excess of present ease at the cost of danger that will befall him later? The sages advised that inconvenience should be borne for the sake of future benefit they hoped would come thereby.*" So al-Ma'mūn said, "Indeed, by preferring the immediate present, many a man has spoiled the consequences in this world and the next."³⁵

This debate apart from showing the dominance of the Sahlid opinion interweaves the political circumstances of the conflict with abstract moral discussions whose religious implications are difficult to position exactly. The authenticity of these discussions, however, can be held suspect partly because of their tendentiousness, as they show the caliph anticipating the strength of the Sahlid argument, and also in view of artistic aspects in the discussions literary construction, which often betrays elements of rhyme and pun. When one of those present advises al-Ma'mūn, saying: "It is said, 'If knowledge of future matters is hidden from you, hold to the proper course for today as much as you can; for you run the risk that today's disorder may bring on tomorrow's disorder for you' (*idhā kāna 'ilmu l-umūri maghīban 'anka fa-khudh mā amkanaka min hidnati yawmika fa-innaka lā ta'man an yakūna fasādu yawmika rāji'an bi-fasādi ghadika*)," we find al-Faḍl's answer rhyming in response to this one. Al-Faḍl says: "*hal yu'manu Muḥammad an yakūna ṭalabaka bi-faḍl quwwatika li-yastazhir 'alayka ghadan 'alā mukhālafaatika?*"³⁶ Upon being asked by al-Ma'mūn earlier how they should respond to al-Amīn's summons to Baghdad, al-Faḍl states, "The matter is dangerous. You have a retinue of your supporters and members of your household (*laka min shi'atika wa ahli baytika biṭānatan*)." Al-Faḍl's reference *ahli baytika* suggests a pun between the mainstream use of the term *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet, and *ahli baytika* as the Persian kindred of al-Ma'mūn in Khurāsān.

³⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 780–82; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 28–30.

³⁶ See the italicized part of al-Faḍl's statement above.

In other instances the irony hinting at the coming advantage of al-Ma'mūn takes the form of an inverted discourse. One example of this can be found in a statement by al-Faḍl b. Sahl, who tells al-Ma'mūn, advising against surrender: "I don't think you should leave position and go to Muḥammad [al-Amīn], stripped of your commanders and soldiers, like a head separated from its body,"³⁷ thereby anticipating the eventual situation of the incumbent caliph, while on another occasion, we find al-Faḍl b. Rabīʿ the one who inadvertently makes a statement with a meaning that is closer to historical reality than he thought. When al-Faḍl is consulted upon al-Rashīd's death as to what to do, and he says, "I will not abandon a present king (*malikan ḥāḍiran*) to another whose fortune I don't know,"³⁸ we also find a narrative laden with irony; in one way showing that the vizir meant he wanted to remain loyal to the caliph in Baghdad, while at the same time sharing a moment of irony with the reader who hears the voice of fate in al-Faḍl's discourse, with its indirect hint that it is indeed al-Ma'mūn who seems at that moment, and more so later, the present king (*al-hāḍir*).

The role of vizirs and outsiders to the 'Abbāsīd family in creating the circumstances and issues that led to conflict is a constant leitmotif in these narratives. But in the distant background of the literary construction one also notices a repeated stress given to the guiding force of fate, which colors the religious philosophy of many accounts. There is a fatalistic tenor in many statements of the actors involved, and close inspection of mundane factual aspects in the narration can confirm the fact that there was a conscious philosophy of fate surrounding the wider movements in the story. A key example that illustrates this can be found in the story of 'Alī b. 'Īsā's fall. In his account of how the news of victory reached al-Ma'mūn, Ṭabarī states that it took only three days for the head of Ibn 'Īsā to reach Khurāsān.³⁹ One may perceive this as a realistic statement and argue, as has been done, that good news travels faster than bad (given that it took two months for the same news of the battle of Rayy to reach Baghdad).⁴⁰ In reality the figure "three days" was chosen in a particular way to reflect ironically on a command that al-Amīn had made to 'Alī just when the commander was preparing to leave Baghdad to the east. At the time, al-Amīn had told 'Alī: "Do not allow 'Abdallāh [al-Ma'mūn] to remain more than three days from the day you capture him."⁴¹ A perfectly diametrically opposite result, however, later happened. Instead of al-Ma'mūn being dispatched within three days after the conquest, it was the head of 'Alī b. 'Īsā that had made it to Khurāsān within three days. The very words that Ibn 'Īsā had heard and tried to implement had ricocheted in time to become the ironic lot of Ibn 'Īsā himself. Once again, it all had come down to that three-lettered word *qadar* (fate).

³⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 815; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 72. ³⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 772.

³⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 802–03. ⁴⁰ Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 140.

⁴¹ Ṭabarī, III, 819 (see full text on p. 162 below).

The military narratives

Other portions of the civil war narrative that raise doubts about historicity are those sections that describe the military confrontation between the warring parties. All the descriptions of various skirmishes during the siege of Baghdad have a formulaic quality. Invariably, they contrast Ṭāhir's troops and their methodical techniques of warfare with the irregulars of the Baghdad commune, who fought with a tenacity and versatility that expressed the desperate struggles of individuals to survive more than a coherent military strategy. The so-called battles of Qaṣr Ṣāliḥ, al-Kināsa, Darb al-Ḥijāra, and al-Shamāsiyya glitter with a heroic quality that harks back to Arab raids of the Jāhiliyya period. Each of these battle scenes, presumably defenses of specific barricades that guarded entryways to the neighborhoods of Baghdad, provides an occasion for recounting a poem recited by a defender or an observer, a poem praising the steadfast resistance of the Baghdādīs or bemoaning the scenes of carnage. Viewed collectively, these poems provide portraits of human suffering and communal desperation, the contrast of life in Baghdad before and after the war, but they inform us very little about the specific context of the battles in question.⁴² It is a curious coincidence that nearly all of this type of poetry falls under the events of the year AH 197.

Less transparent but also suspicious are the scenes of pitched battles that took place between the two sides early in the conflict (AH 195 and 196). The centerpiece in the military narrative is the account of Ṭāhir's victory over the armies of 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān. The description of that victory seems to be an attempt to vindicate the positions of righteousness and morality. Strictly speaking, the reader joins the military narrative expecting the battle to be resolved in favor of 'Alī b. 'Īsā. After all, 'Alī's army was larger and better equipped than Ṭāhir's, and Ṭabarī strengthens this impression when he states that the people of Baghdad "had never seen an army with more men, livelier mounts, brighter swords, fuller equipment, or in more perfect array than ['Alī's] army."⁴³ In contrast, Ṭāhir could only exhort al-Ma'mūn's followers in the style of the commanders of the early Islamic conquests, saying that victory is not attained by numbers alone but by commitment to righteousness. He said to his troops before battle:

You friends of God (*yā awliyā' allāh*) and people who are loyal and give Him thanks, you are not like these whom you see – people of perfidy and treachery. They have neglected what you have preserved; they have scorned what you have honored; they have violated the oaths to which you have been faithful; they are seeking only what is false and are fighting in a state of treachery and ignorance – men of plunder and

⁴² Many have seen in these accounts portraits of a Baghdādī social movement that heralded the Ḥanbalī movement of later times. The political conclusions derived from the anecdotal accounts, however, are exaggerated. Shaban, *Islamic History*, II, 44–45; I Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society, *IJMES* 6 (1975), 363–85. ⁴³ Ṭabarī, III, 818; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 75.

pillage! If you avert your eyes and make firm your feet, God will fulfill his promise and open to you the gates of His strength and help . . . be steadfast, be steadfast! Defend [your honor], defend [your honor] . . . attend to those in front of you, rather than to those behind you, for only effort and valor (*al-jidd wa al-ṣabr*) will save you.⁴⁴

In contrast to Ṭāhir, who is shown as conscious of his weakness and deferential to destiny, Ibn ʿĪsā comes across as careless and conceited. His march to battle is marked by casualness and confidence in victory. When he is told that Ṭāhir has encamped at Rayy, ʿAlī laughingly shrugs off the dangerous side of that strategy by saying, “What is Ṭāhir? By God, he is a mere thorn, compared to my branches; or a spark, compared to my fire . . . all that stands between you and his being snapped like a tree in a tempest is his learning of our crossing the pass of Hamadān. Lambs are not strong enough to butt with their horns; neither do foxes have the endurance to encounter lions.”⁴⁵ Before the battle begins ʿAlī’s only source of encouragement to his troops is to tell them that their number is greater than that of the enemy, and that the latter will flee the moment they see their charge. In all, ʿAlī is built up as the archetype of the vain commander who fights neither for principles nor out of genuine loyalty to the caliph, but in order to further his personal political ambitions and to continue to exploit the wealth of others, as he had done as governor of Khurāsān. Viewed in this light, the text leaves little doubt about the religious and moral nature of the fight, even without the brothers’ involvement. The stylistic resemblance of Ṭāhir’s review of his troops, his exhortation to them, and his attitude of humility is in contrast built up to show how the righteous can be victorious even if their numbers are few. A community conscious of this phenomenon was formed in the early Islamic conquests against the Sasanians, and the reader was being led to see how in the civil war narrative the roles were repeating, albeit reversed, in the ʿAbbāsīd period. The narrative’s emphasis on establishing this parallel is highlighted when we are told that, when Ṭāhir came within two *farsakhs* (six miles) of al-Madāʾin, “he dismounted, prayed two *rakʿas*, and added many extra prayers to God, saying, ‘O God, we ask for help, as Thou didst help the Muslims at the Battle of Madāʾin.’”⁴⁶

The defeat of Ibn ʿĪsā was only the first, albeit probably the most important, in a series of setbacks that al-Amīn’s armies suffered. In these battles between Ṭāhir’s and al-Amīn’s generals, we no longer find the moral lesson illustrated by the story of Ibn ʿĪsā’s arrogant rise and humiliating fall. In fact, in the accounts of those later battles we may note new messages that sometimes cast a favorable light on the pro-Amīn faction. To be sure Ṭāhir’s victorious sweep continues throughout, but it occurs with ever-greater difficulty and cost, and finds its righteous character slowly blemished. The four decisive battles that followed the initial victory were those of Hamadān and Asadabādh (against ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Jabla al-Abnāwī), Ḥulwān (attended

⁴⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 823; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 81.

⁴⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 820; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 77.

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 859; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 123.

by ‘Abdallāh b. Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba, and Aḥmad b. Mazyad al-Shaybānī), al-Ahwāz (against Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Ḥātim al-Muhallabī), and al-Madā’in (attended by the commanders: al-Faḍl b. Mūsā b. ‘Īsā al-Hāshimī, Abū al-Salāsīl, Iyās al-Ḥarbī, and Jūmhūr al-Najjārī). In the descriptions of these battle scenes, unlike in Ibn ‘Īsā’s narration, there is less emphasis on the righteousness and more on the heroic aspects of the fight on both sides. While Ṭāhir ultimately wins the battle, the narrator always – except in the Hulwān case – stresses how resolute was the resistance of al-Amīn’s armies, and what a close call the outcome was.

‘Abdallāh b. Šāliḥ, one of Ṭabarī’s narrators who recounts the battle between Ṭāhir and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnāwī, repeatedly stresses how both sides fought fiercely and held out steadfastly. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, like his predecessor, has a low view of his opponent, which is revealed when he says such things as, “People of the Abnā’! Sons of kings, and men familiar with swords. These are Persians; they are not men who can last for long or show endurance.” Yet he is, unlike Ibn ‘Īsā, diligent and loyal in battle. This time ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, we are told, anxiously advised his troops to hold their ground, echoing Ṭāhir’s earlier exhortation. The narrator states that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān

would pass by each banner, saying, “Show endurance, for we need to endure only a little while. This [hour] is the beginning of endurance and victory!” With his own hands he fought hard and made fierce charges; with every charge he inflicted much slaughter upon Ṭāhir’s forces, but no one withdrew or moved from his place. Then one of Ṭāhir’s men attacked ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s standard bearer and killed him, and Ṭāhir’s forces made a bold rush against their foe . . . and [drove] them back to the gate of Hamadān.

The account then describes how Ṭāhir put Hamadān under siege and steadily tightened the siege until suffering and starvation in the city was so great that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān sought amnesty for himself and his men.

The story seems to end here, but a certain ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Šāliḥ (perhaps a brother of the earlier narrator) suddenly resuscitates the earlier narrative, throwing al-Amīn’s commander into the fray anew. This time the narrator states that, when ‘Abd al-Raḥmān surrendered, he tried to appear peaceful and loyal to the terms of surrender. Hence Ṭāhir and his troops let the commander and his troops keep their weapons, and disregarded their movements until suddenly one day the unsuspecting Ṭāhir and his troops found ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and his followers regrouping and coming against them in a bold charge. Ṭabarī describes this situation as follows:

The foot soldiers among Ṭāhir’s forces held their ground against them by means of swords, shields, and arrows; they knelt down on their knees and fought him as fiercely as possible . . . until the swords became ragged and spears broke in two. Then ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s forces fled. He himself dismounted with some of his companions and fought until he was killed. His companions said to him, “You can escape; do so! The foe has wearied of fighting. The battle has tired them out. They have no energy or strength to pursue.” He kept saying, “I will never retreat! The Commander of the Faithful shall

never see the face of me defeated.” There was great slaughter among his companions, and his army was destroyed.⁴⁷

The account ends with a poem eulogizing that commander.

From a literary point of view, the story of the battle of Asadabādh is significant for the way it encompasses all of the elements of dramatic description. Unlike the battle between Ibn ‘Īsā and Ṭāhir, it is not manifestly prejudiced in favor of one side or another. Those anxious for al-Ma’mūn’s success can find that the account provides a flattering description of the performance of his troops (even though Ṭāhir articulates no pietistic propaganda this time, as he did at Rayy). However, the account may be probed for moral lessons besides those dealing with the question of the succession crisis per se. The central role that al-Amīn’s commander plays in the above two narratives is deliberately intended to focus attention on the performance of that general. Unlike ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā, he prepares carefully for battle, and continues to devise military strategies even after his numbers have dwindled, and he has surrendered. The refusal of the commander to escape also drives home the point that not all of al-Amīn’s commanders were vain, as was Ibn ‘Īsā, or treacherous. The Abnā’ must have continued to find supporters among later narrators, who viewed them as exemplary in their loyalty to the caliphate, irrespective of the character of the caliph, and to the moral issues contested during the conflict. ‘Abd al-Rahmān can briefly feign surrender to the enemy, but we are led to see how his personality, so strongly shaped by a sense of honor and duty, prevented him, almost subconsciously, from accepting compromise. In a military example, the lines between the commander’s sense of obligation to the caliph and sense of personal honor are shown in the end intertwined and reinforcing one another in a deadly psychological mix.

That the depiction of military loyalty was the core intention of this account can be confirmed when we recognize how this image surfaces again in other battle scenes. In his description of a battle near al-Madā’in, Ṭabarī, citing Yazīd b. al-Ḥārith as his source, states that, as the battle turned sour for al-Amīn’s army, al-Faḍl b. Mūsā b. ‘Īsā al-Hāshimī started having major difficulties in fighting. As the fighting worsened, al-Faḍl’s horse fell. Another commander, Abū’l-Salāsīl, who happened to be nearby, fended off those who grouped around al-Faḍl until the latter was able to remount. When al-Faḍl was safe, Abū’l-Salāsīl then addressed him, saying, “Describe this moment for the Commander of the Faithful (*udhkur hadhā l-mawqif li-amīr l-mu’mīnīn . . .*)”⁴⁸ No doubt the point here is that the commander was eager to be viewed by the caliph as having fought honorably, even in the most lethal circumstances. That al-Amīn’s political tide was on the retreat and al-Ma’mūn’s prospects were

⁴⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 831; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 89–90.

⁴⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 859. The pride that governs the commander’s comments in that instance was meant to stand in contradiction to the advice al-Amīn earlier gave to another commander, Ahmad b. Mazyad, telling him: “Do not put yourself in jeopardy just to seek my favor (*lā tukhāṭir bi-nafsika ṭalaba al-zulfata ‘indī*”: Ṭabarī, III, 839).

seeming ever so certain did not lessen the significance of the loyalty and fighting tenacity of the Abnā'.⁴⁹

A third example of the loyalty of the 'Abbāsīd commanders to their assigned tasks arises in the confrontation at al-Ahwāz. The narrator of that story, Yazīd b. al-Ḥārith, says that when Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Muhallabī saw the convergence of al-Ma'mūn's armies (led by Quraysh b. Shibl, al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Ma'mūnī, and al-Ḥusayn b. 'Umar al-Rustamī) on al-Ahwāz, he recognized that the situation was becoming increasingly unfavorable. He called for a meeting of his command and asked them, "What do you think best? Should I put off the encounter with the enemy, or should I fight it out with them, regardless of whether it is to my advantage? By God, I do not think that I should go back to the Commander of the Faithful or leave al-Ahwāz." They said to him, "The best plan is for you to return to al-Ahwāz and fortify yourself there." The account goes on to describe how Yazīd had barely made it inside the city before the commanders of Ṭāhir converged on him and laid siege. With the specter of battle looming closer, we are told that Yazīd "called for money, and it was poured out before him. He said to his companions, 'Whoever among you wants reward and rank, let him show me his mettle' . . . There was not one of his men who did not gather for himself as many stones as he could." As the battle was joined and Muḥammad's supporters were reduced, he prepared to make his final assault. But before that, he again gathered his close entourage and declared to them, "What do you think best? . . . I see that those on my side have been routed. I fear they will abandon me. I do not expect them to return. I have decided to dismount and fight by myself, until God decrees what He wants. Whoever of you wishes to depart, let him depart. By God, I would rather that you survive than that you perish and be destroyed!" They replied, "'Then we would be treating you unjustly, by God! You freed us from slavery, raised us up from humiliation, enriched us after we were poor – and then we are to abandon you in this condition! No, we will advance before you and die beside the stirrup of your horse. May God curse this world and life after your death!' Then they dismounted, hamstrung their horses, and attacked Quraysh's forces fiercely, killing many of them, and crushing their heads with rocks and other things. But one of Ṭāhir's men reached Muḥammad b. Yazīd, struck him with a spear, and felled him. The men rushed to strike and thrust at him until they killed him."⁵⁰ Like the earlier story of Ibn Jabla, Yazīd's death is commemorated with eulogizing verse, and even Ṭāhir is made to concede the error of murdering so noble a person.

There is very little that a critic could add to the vivid nature of these military narratives. Their realism, almost photographic in detail, depicts the

⁴⁹ Ibn Tayfūr provides a description of a discussion between al-Ma'mūn and several of his commanders, where they debate the relative merits of the Persian, Turkish, and the Abnā' soldiers. In the end the conclusion is that the Abnā' were the most tenacious and skilled warriors: Ibn Tayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 78. ⁵⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 853–54; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 116–17.

depth of human emotion in the atmosphere of war. Here we do not need the helping hand of poetic allusion to convey the intended meaning. The contest between the armies is shown in essence as a struggle over existence shaped by a conflict of opposing loyalties. The physical dimension of the fight is dark and poignant, but audiences would have looked more to the moral tenacity of both protagonists without here associating the fight with al-Amin and al-Ma'mūn. And while the battles scenes seemed ostensibly to document the progress of the war between the brothers, they also served as images of a contest that had become individualized down to particular commanders and soldiers in their regiments. Declarations of loyalty on different levels in the hierarchy served to show the birth of a sincere will among various soldiers and how for a moment all socially recognized barriers and limits on responsibility melted away. From then on, the real tragedy of the battle scenes lay no longer in the physical suffering but in the sincere moral sacrifice, and the difficult task of evaluating the warriors according to a distant political controversy.

The thematic significance of discord in the 'Abbāsīd house

A casual reader of the story of rivalry between the brothers will no doubt be surprised by the contradictions in the descriptions of the two and by the imagery that sometimes undermines the surface message of the narrative. Al-Ma'mūn, for example, does not always stand up to the ideals of righteousness, and al-Amīn, however repugnant and inert, manages on occasion to come across as a model of political wisdom and human sensitivity. Just before bidding farewell to the army of 'Alī b. 'Īsā that marched out to fight al-Ma'mūn in AH 196, Ṭabarī tells us that al-Amīn instructed the general on how to conduct the campaign of war and handle al-Ma'mūn. In this statement of military advice, which in its moralistic tenor harkens back to Abū Bakr's advice to the army of Usāma b. Zayd that was sent against the Byzantines,⁵¹ al-Amīn commands 'Alī: "Forbid your soldiers to harass the populace, or raid the people of the villages, or cut trees, or rape women . . . If any of the soldiers or notables of the people of Khurāsān comes out to you, honor him openly and give him a generous gift. Do not punish a brother for his brother. Remit for the people of Khurāsān one-fourth of the land tax (*kharāj*). Grant no quarter to anyone who shoots an arrow at you or who thrusts at one of your companions with a spear. Do not allow 'Abdallāh to remain more than three days from the day you capture him. When you send him forth, let him be with your most trustworthy companion. If Satan beguiles him so that he shows himself hostile to you, be careful to bind him well (*uḥruṣ 'alā an ta'surahu asran*). If he escapes from you into one of the districts of Khurāsān, take

⁵¹ Ṭabarī, I, 1850.

charge yourself of going after him. Have you understood all that I have charged you?" 'Alī replies, "Yes."⁵²

This virtuous advice is not anomalous in the text. Later, as the caliph prepared another expedition to the east, he also gave that commander similar sound political advice.⁵³ Viewed against the backdrop of descriptions that show the caliph to be utterly ignorant of how to handle the tasks of rulership, these statements seem to paint a different image, that of a leader who is both conscientious and realistic about the purpose of the war. The latter fact takes on greater significance when we recall that the reasoned political and moral advice of a ruler can be found lacking on the side of al-Ma'mūn and Ṭāhir. Such silence on al-Ma'mūn's side is all the more alarming given the destruction that al-Ma'mūn's armies brought on Baghdad.

Equally remarkable is the humanistic representation of al-Amīn's personality, which is unique among these civil war narratives. Although we know, for example, that al-Amīn felt no shame infringing on al-Ma'mūn's rights to succession and sequestering his wealth, one cannot but be surprised at how al-Amīn dealt with al-Ma'mūn's family in Baghdad. After successive defeats at Rayy and Hamadān, al-Amīn's political options had narrowed greatly, forcing him to scramble for more troops. Finally, he settled on one of the few remaining veteran commanders, Asad b. Yazīd b. Mazyad al-Shaybānī, as leader of the next expedition. Just before Asad was invested with command, however, the two men had a brief discussion, in the middle of which al-Amīn was shocked at a suggestion from this tribal leader. Seeking to put pressure on al-Ma'mūn in ways other than military, Asad told al-Amīn, "Give me the two sons of 'Abdallāh al-Ma'mūn [who were in Baghdad at the time] to be prisoners in my hands. If he gives me obedience and submits to me [well and good]; if not, I will deal with them according to my judgement and carry out my command upon them." Hearing this suggestion, al-Amīn rebuked the commander, telling him, "You are a mad Bedouin! I call upon you to lead the Arabs and the Persians; I assign you the tax revenues of the districts of al-Jibāl

⁵² The report is narrated by 'Amr b. Sa'īd: Ṭabarī, III, 819; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 75–76. Fishbein accurately points to the way 'Alī's behavior in the early part of the war directly contradicted al-Amīn's advice, citing 'Alī's flogging of defectors from al-Ma'mūn's camp: Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 76, n.306.

⁵³ When Aḥmad b. Mazyad, commander of that campaign, prepared to depart, Ṭabarī says, he came before al-Amīn and said, "Give me your charge, may God bestow honor upon the Commander of the Faithful!" Muḥammad said:

I commend a number of good traits to you. Beware of envy, for envy is the shackle of aid [from God]. Take no step forward without asking God's blessing. Unsheathe the sword only after giving a warning. If you can accomplish something by mildness, do not go beyond it to roughness and sharpness. Be a good companion to the regular soldiers (*jund*) who are with you. Inform me of your news every day. Do not endanger yourself in the pursuit of favor with me, and do not bestir yourself in anything that you fear may rebound to my disadvantage. *Be a sincere brother and good comrade to 'Abdallāh* [b. Ḥumayd]; do your best to join with him, accompany him, and be on good terms with him. Do not let him down, if he asks you for help; do not delay, if he calls on you to aid. Let your hands be one and your word be in agreement. (Ṭabarī, III, 839; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 99 [slightly modified]).

province as far as Khurāsān; I raise your rank above your peers among the sons of military commanders and kings – and you call upon me to kill my children and spill the blood of my family! Truly, this is folly and insanity!”⁵⁴ For all his treachery, al-Amīn still abided by the ‘Abbāsīd custom that forbade mistreatment of members of the household. Perhaps more importantly, al-Amīn’s statement is intended to highlight his humane side which recognized the limits on this conflict and subverted alternative narrative portrayals of his personality and motives.

The sympathetic current of historiography about al-Amīn’s reign was largely examined in chapter 3 above. The defensive nature of this line of historical representation, it was argued, took shape in response to the initial pietistic propaganda of al-Ma’mūn, which defamed his brother. In the years following the regicide, further pro-Amīn narratives began to develop, casting new doubts on al-Ma’mūn’s political nature and motives. The political and military advice that al-Amīn reportedly gave his commanders and his various humanistic gestures have no counterpart on al-Ma’mūn’s side. This lack of comparable evidence of moralizing by al-Ma’mūn was itself a discreet method the narrators used to uplift the image of al-Amīn. For his part, al-Ma’mūn did not let this propagandistic approach go unanswered. In later years, we find, the new caliph did his best to inculcate an image of himself as a forgiving and magnanimous person. A widely cited Ma’mūnid declaration indirectly refuted malicious insinuations: “If only people knew how much I like to forgive, they would have found no better way to seek my bounty than by committing crimes (*la-taqqarrabū ilayya bi’l-jar’im*).”⁵⁵ The statement is attributed to no other ‘Abbāsīd caliph, and there are various reasons to accept its historicity.

We find an attempt on his part to support this image in the practical arena as well. In the year 825 (AH 210), the chronicles tell us that al-Ma’mūn finally captured his renegade uncle, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. After al-Ma’mūn returned to Baghdad, Ibrāhīm had gone into hiding, fearful that he would be punished for assuming the caliphal title during the interlude of al-Ma’mūn’s rule from Khurāsān. Ibrāhīm’s fear was no doubt justified, although it is unlikely that the caliph would have been so rash in the period of reconciliation after his return to Baghdad as to reopen old wounds by murdering the brother of Hārūn. Nevertheless, the occasion was quickly portrayed by al-Ma’mūn as a momentous triumph over treachery. Ibrāhīm’s former political pretensions were now declared a colossal treason, and the caliph deliberately placed the burden of blame for the preceding chaos in Baghdad on this person who, considering his light-hearted character had probably been half-jesting when he accepted the caliphal title from the ‘Abbāsīd family in the first place. The occasion quickly turned into a public relations event in which the caliph grandly conferred with his advisors on what to do with the ‘Abbāsīd prisoner. Nearly

⁵⁴ Tabarī, III, 836; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 95–96.

⁵⁵ Ibn Tayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 51, 107; *Muwaffaqiyyāt*, 284. Al-Zubayr ← al-Zubayr’s uncle ← ‘Alī b. Hishām.

all of the caliph's advisors reportedly recommended the execution of Ibrāhīm. After much deliberation, the caliph pardoned his uncle before members of the court, and the gesture was hailed by both Ibrāhīm and the advisors as a tremendous feat of forgiveness that defied the rational laws of justice and careful political planning.

The description of al-Ma'mūn's decision-making process is constructed and ordered climactically to amplify the resonance of his final virtuous decision. When the caliph neared his judgment and Ibrāhīm stood before him and the assembly, the caliph broke the silence of that suspenseful moment by telling Ibrāhīm, "I can only say what Joseph said to his brothers,⁵⁶ 'There is no reproach upon you today; God will forgive you, and He is the most merciful of those showing mercy.'"⁵⁷ This phrase, which is the Qur'ānic verse that reports the then-powerful Joseph's declaration of pardon for his troublesome brothers when they come to him in weakness, was meant to associate al-Ma'mūn with Joseph's moral high ground.⁵⁸ The use of this quote from Joseph was particularly evocative, not only because it showed a parallel of pardon, but more significantly because it drew a social and religious connection between al-Ma'mūn's and Joseph's histories. Joseph's victimization by his brothers, and his success in overcoming abuse, abduction, imprisonment, and slavery, were clearly intended to mesh with various dimensions in al-Ma'mūn's life. Al-Ma'mūn's success in overcoming the encroachments of his brother and in returning triumphant from exile put him in a position from which he could utter the same magnanimous words, thus showing that his story and behavior are the stuff that makes up the lives of prophets. When al-Ma'mūn recites the Qur'ānic verse associated with Joseph's forgiveness, the narrator no doubt also intends that we read the caliph's recital of the divine word in the context of the medieval controversy over the caliphs' divine right to rule.

On a different level, al-Ma'mūn's forgiveness of his uncle was intended to evoke a connection with the story of the Prophet's forgiveness of the Meccans after the conquest of Mecca.⁵⁹ When Muḥammad asks the elders of Mecca what they think his judgment on them will be, and they say, "*akhun karīm wa ibnu akhin karīm*,"⁶⁰ the reader lives through a brief moment of suspense,

⁵⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1081.

⁵⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1076–81; Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 100–05, 112; Bosworth, *HT*, XXII, 153. Al-Ma'mūn's statement is a quote from the Qur'ān 12:92.

⁵⁸ The reader will note the stylistic connection of this account to the narrative "Zubayda's Nightmare," recounted earlier (p. 62). Both texts were crafted by a pro-Ma'mūnid pen.

⁵⁹ *Murūj*, III, 30.

⁶⁰ Ṭabarī, I, 1642. This phrase may have been instrumental in shaping the narrative of another portion of al-Ma'mūn's story. When al-Ma'mūn feared returning to Baghdad at the outbreak of war with his brother, Ṭabarī tells us that the people of Khurāsān rallied to his support on the basis of their affinity to his Persian maternal roots. Thus they described him saying, "He is the son of our sister, and the cousin of the Messenger of God" (Ṭabarī, III, 774). The attribution of such a phrase toward al-Ma'mūn alone among the caliphs leads one to note how earlier historical narratives were plundered by later redactors to articulate different messages within the same story. The literary style in chronologically disparate episodes is our only remaining clue to the source of composition.

anticipating a decision that would define the nature of the ruler and his victory, very much in the same way that al-Ma'mūn's prolonged discussion of how to judge Ibrāhīm does this. Ultimately, al-Ma'mūn's behavior is shown as connected with that of the Prophet, not only because of the Hashemite tie between the two,⁶¹ but because the conquest of Baghdad marked a new era of rule, much as the conquest of Mecca did. The clouds surrounding al-Ma'mūn's responsibility for his brother's fall were only cleared by the caliph's demonstrated forgiveness of another errant political opponent, who was also a relative.⁶²

Al-Ma'mūn found himself constantly forced to address inevitable hostile insinuations. With the memory of the early Islamic *fitnas* kept alive by a style that left a lasting impression of ambiguity and tragedy, chroniclers cast the 'Abbāsīd crisis in terms that connected it with elements from early Islamic accounts. The pro-Amīn narrators went beyond characterizing the civil war as a *fitna*, evoking a direct connection between the fate of al-Amīn and that of 'Uthmān, as shown above. Once again, al-Ma'mūn could not let this comparison go unanswered. He had to show that he was suffering deeply over the news of his brother's death, and defended himself by referring to motifs from the past, saying, "By God, I can only say what the Commander of the Faithful 'Alī said when he received the news of 'Uthmān's murder: 'By God, I did not kill, or order or sanction the murder.'"⁶³ Whether such a remark successfully allayed suspicions within the community or simply channeled the confusion back to discussions of the narrative of the first *fitna* cannot be clearly established. It seems certain, however, that al-Ma'mūn's rhetoric targeted immediate political problems.

Two tracks of divergent voices favorable to the brothers, then, seem to cohabit in the narrative of the civil war. Some might argue that the ensuing contradictions, particularly the pro-Amīn voice, form only an anomalous strand in the mainstream perceptions of narrators. I would argue, however, that such contradictory messages are neither isolated nor a result of mismatched accounts, but are rather a central feature of the overall vision of Ṭabarī and others of the succession crisis and its meanings. For the story of the brothers represented to medieval chroniclers not only a temporal political transition conveying implications of one direction or another, but also forms a complex drama of human behavior.

When lining up the distinct reports of narrators in chronological order, one

⁶¹ The alleged Khurāsānī characterization of al-Ma'mūn toward the beginning of the civil war as "*ibnu khālatinā wa ibnu 'amm rasūl allāh*" echoes the style of the Meccans, although they serve unrelated thematic functions.

⁶² Al-Ma'mūn applied the same scenario of building up the crime of a political opponent and then forgiving him in the case of the rebel of Jazīra, Naṣr b. Shabath al-'Uqaylī. The chronicles here also give us uncharacteristically detailed accounts of the exchange between the caliph and the former rebel and of how the matter was resolved after the caliph's consultation with his advisors. Ṭabarī, III, 1068–72; Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 77.

⁶³ *Murūj*, IV, 298.

might see the work of Ṭabarī as a factual assemblage of the surviving factual testimonies. However, the reports can be better understood if we view them as scenes that dramatize certain themes and actions. Although apparently sensibly arranged in chronological order (except on occasion), the scenes in fact require rearranging for one to discern their meaning in the sweep of a delicately structured, thematic plot. Once we restructure the 'Abbāsīd narrative according to its complex internal literary and philosophical purposes, the assumptions we may have held about which aspects are historically accurate become doubtful. It is even safe to say that the very connection of the text to history becomes no more than that of Shakespeare's plays to their suggested historical settings and contexts. What types of meaning does the 'Abbāsīd narrative sustain, and how can we detect these in a parable style that is fragmentary, arcane, and esoteric? This question has yet to be answered.

The description of al-Amīn's troubled reign, for example, does more than justify al-Ma'mūn's rise to power. The story is a parable of how an errant ruler comes to recognize his faults. The caliph's faults are dramatized as tragic flaws that cannot be dealt with singularly and definitively. In hindsight, for example, we know that al-Amīn's supporters were no more than corrupt, politically ambitious advisors (e.g., al-Sindī b. Shāhik and Muḥammad b. 'Isā b. Nahīk), but the important point is not that we know who those people were, but rather that we observe how this reality can beset a monarchy in general, and how the caliph comes to recognize this reality slowly (and perhaps even dies without fully knowing it; al-Amīn never fully recognizes Aḥmad b. Sallām's damaging role). The process of recognition here, as events show, entails a journey down the path of dethronement, humiliation, and suffering. The tragic element in al-Amīn's life is not accidental, finite, or solely connected with al-Ma'mūn. Al-Amīn's tragedy is necessary for the caliph to develop his consciousness of life and to attain spiritual wisdom.

We pity al-Amīn long before his downfall, because he cannot see more than one dimension in the convoluted world of politics. He only understands when reality confronts him directly, and even then he reacts to it with a childlike surprise that has no place in the political world of al-Manṣūr and Abū Muslim. He places his full trust in 'Alī b. 'Isā's family, never suspecting that this family was driven by selfish political ambition to the exclusion of any loyalty to ethical principles, or the dynasty. When 'Alī's son, Ḥusayn, staged a coup in Baghdad in AH 196 that briefly resulted in the arrest and imprisonment (and near-murder) of al-Amīn, the latter in the end could only come forth with a statement drenched with naiveté, telling the now-arrested Ḥusayn, "Did I not advance your father over people? Did I not give him charge of cavalry troops and fill his hand with money? Did I not give you positions of honor among the people of Khurāsān and raise your ranks above those of other commanders?" "Yes," he replied. "Then how have I deserved your repudiating obedience to me," he asked, "your inciting the people against me, and your urging them to fight me?" Ḥusayn said, "I trust the pardon of the Commander of the

Faithful and hope for his forgiveness and favor.”⁶⁴ Then, believing that Ḥusayn could be rehabilitated, al-Amīn pardoned him, bestowed honorific robes on him, and put him in charge of an expedition heading to the eastern front. The narrator, ‘Uthmān b. Sa’īd al-Tā’ī, however, follows by saying that no sooner did Ḥusayn leave Baghdad than he betrayed the caliph again by attempting to flee, until eventually he was recaptured and murdered after al-Amīn called on the people of Baghdad to pursue the renegade notable.⁶⁵ The same type of disillusionment that al-Amīn expresses towards al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī is repeated and amplified later, this time in relation to the whole faction of the Abnā’ in the final days of the siege of Baghdad.⁶⁶ Throughout much of the war, the caliph conceives of himself as living in a coherent, harmonious, and loyal political atmosphere in his court. He places his trust in those who ingratiate themselves with him at court, but ironically, indeed tragically from the reader’s viewpoint, al-Amīn never recognizes that his true loyalists are those dying on battlefields far from him. By the time Baghdad is largely destroyed, he begins to realize the lack of true supporters around him, seeing only vagabonds willing to defend him as long as he can pay them, even down to his last household furnishings; he can no longer do anything but break down in frustration, saying, “Would that both parties died. For these [i.e., his supporters] fight for me for my money, and the others fight to take my life.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Tabarī, III, 849; Fishbein, *HT*, XXXI, 849. ⁶⁵ Tabarī, III, 849.

⁶⁶ Tabarī states that al-Amīn appeared to the Abnā’ from a balcony of his palace and addressed them as follows:

O company of the Abnā’ and people who preceded [all others] in following right guidance! You know of my negligence in the days when al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī’ was my vizir and adviser . . . causing me regret among courtiers and commoners. Finally, you alerted me, and I took notice; you sought my aid in everything that displeased you in regard to myself and among you; and I gave you unsparingly what my kingdom contained and my power had obtained – what I had gathered and what I had inherited from my fathers. I named as commander someone who was not suitable . . . I strove – God knows – to gain your approval by every means I could; you strove – God knows – to displease me by every means you could . . . Then, under the leadership of Ḥusayn, you revolted against me, deposed me, and reviled me. You seized me, imprisoned me, bound me, and you forbade me from mentioning some things. The hatred in your hearts and your disobedience became greater and greater. But I praise God, as one who has submitted to His command and accepted His decree. Peace!” (Tabarī, III, 931–32; Fishbein, *HT*, XXI, 203–04)

This image of a caliph trusting his core group of supporters, and then realizing their unreliability during a crisis is repeated in the chronicles regarding the reign of al-Musta’in. Al-Musta’in, who relied on the Turks, soon recognized a mutinous trend among his generals. When the commanders failed in the beginning to oust the caliph, they reportedly came to him apologizing, and al-Musta’in, like al-Amīn, then addressed a rebuke to them, saying:

You are people of corruption and ill-repute who belittle the bonds of privilege. Didn’t you bring your children for me to put on the military rolls, about two thousand of them, and didn’t I agree to let them join you? And didn’t I order that your daughters, about four thousand women, be counted among the married? Then there were those who had just reached puberty, the recently born. I have seen to it that all your desires were met. I poured out my gifts to you until I was giving you the gold and the silver that I deprived myself of. All of that I did in an attempt to please you and to attend to your welfare. In return you persisted in your corruption, infamy, arrogance and threats. (Tabarī, III, 1544; Saliba, *HT*, XXXV, 35) ⁶⁷ *Murūj*, IV, 290.

As he approaches his end, al-Amīn is suddenly endowed by the narrators with a new level of awareness and understanding of the tragedy of the human condition and the historical process. This is partly reflected in his heightened eloquence toward the end, his growing piety, and more dignified posture vis-à-vis his followers in his farewell address and in dealing with Aḥmad b. Sallām. Tragically, however, the caliph's journey of intellectual awareness and self-discovery does not stop at his understanding of this sour reality. The journey is an experience programmed, like the tragedy of the Barmakids and other episodes of moral crisis, to destroy its subject. There is no turning back if reality is to be ultimately meaningful. Al-Amīn recognizes that and faces his fall with exemplary Senecan stoicism and self-reliance, refusing to blame his ministers or let anyone partake of the psychological discovery he has made.

The meanings he gains from his final experience relate not only to political matters, such as the reversible fortune of monarchy and the inscrutable origins of *fitna*. The political lesson in his story is but one part of the more elusive religio-historical moral. The political problem provides the conduit to more profound humanistic lessons that narrators were aiming for as they tried to examine the interaction of man with reversals in fate, his understanding of change, and the burden that tragedy can level on the sanity of its victim.⁶⁸

Ṭabarī's vivid descriptions of al-Amīn's outbursts of frustration in his final moments, of the futile defense, and of the macabre murder all assume significance only because the sources familiarize us so much with the early life of al-Amīn – his careful upbringing at court, his affectionate character, and his forgiving bent (as shown by the story of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. 'Īsā). This feeling image we acquire of al-Amīn's character is then augmented in the drama with the insight we gain into al-Amīn's mind. As he nears the end, al-Amīn uncovers new layers in his rationality that put the reader in direct touch with his true psyche. His shaken conversation with Ibn Sallām is intended to target the reader more than seek answers from his companion. When he asks Ibn Sallām if he thinks the enemy would remain faithful to the agreement (*amān*, *aymān*), al-Amīn cares little for Ibn Sallām's answer, as he seeks his opportunity next for philosophizing about life and politics ("Woe to life [*hayhāt*]! Kingship is a barren thing that recognizes no kin-tie"). The deposed al-Amīn becomes introspective in a way that al-Amīn who wrote the belligerent letters to al-Ma'mūn never was.

Towards the end, al-Amīn's personality greatly expands in character range as he slowly comes to acquire the knowledge the reader possessed all along – whether from hindsight, from knowing the truth about the caliph's early supporters, or from seeing the juxtaposition in the fates of the Barmakids and the 'Abbāsids. As the tragic center of the plot, however, al-Amīn does not get to know it all because as an actor he must function within the limitations of time and space frames that separate the actions, thoughts, and motives of different

⁶⁸ Compare this with Yaḥyā's story regarding the *Sikbāja*: Jahshiyārī, 245.

scenes. Even his nearly paranormal breakthrough to understand reality (regarding the responsibility of al-Ma'mūn) had to be put under constraints in order to maintain his literary integrity as a victim.

When al-Amīn asked Ibn Sallām who he is, and the latter said, "I am your *mawlā*," we saw al-Amīn dig a little into his background in Raqqa, and remember how gentle Ibn Sallām used to be toward him in his youth. Al-Amīn's purposeful digression from the immediate context of imprisonment and near-death experience to explore this background is meant to build up Ibn Sallām's character for a reason, which the caliph then alludes to ironically, when he says, "You used to come to me and often show me kindness. You are not my *mawlā*; you are my brother and one of my own [family]." Overtly, al-Amīn had placed his trust in Ibn Sallām, but as the caliph's mind pondered his fate with deep introspection, he was uttering words that were explicating the truth of his condition. Ibn Sallām is like a brother to him, which for al-Amīn is the highest compliment, but we know that it was this brother (i.e., Ibn Sallām) who was responsible for this final wretched state. Dramatically, al-Amīn was now getting very close to gaining full knowledge, and it is no coincidence that the narrative takes him out of the picture before the caliph's position as an actor becomes confounded with that of the reader.

In his last few moments, the caliph finds himself telescoping events that spanned his childhood, youth, political rule, and final state. Like a rehearsal of the Islamic conception of final judgment, the caliph is reduced to the role of an ordinary believer, trying one last time to make sense of his path in life. His assessment is now as pressed in time as it can be, pressured between life and death, as the confrontation is cast in its most poignant terms: the duel between force and defenselessness. The graded passage of downfall and humiliation that we saw earlier now narrows to one option for the tragic victim: a final release from his physical and mental debacle. Ironically, no one is better positioned to grasp the ultimate message of this drama than the reader himself, represented in the plot by Aḥmad b. Sallām, the historical eyewitness whose frightened peek from behind the rolled mats in the corner is meant less to describe an actual physical fear than to allude to the role of the orthodox historical reader/observer, who, like Aḥmad stares *fitna* straight in the eye but can do little to comprehend or cope with it psychologically.

The episode of al-Amīn's murder and its narrative blend well with similar moments of regicide in other histories. In its barest outline, the narrative of downfall reflects a mindset all too familiar in other societies. Unable and/or unwilling to accept the downfall of a monarch without regret, historians have long built up dramas that commemorate their fallen kings as it vindicates their opposition to them. The classical tale often portrayed the king admitting his flaw in his final hour, normally only to himself, and then being suddenly seized by an unknown hand and killed in a corner, by murderers who are unthanked,

ignored, and even punished.⁶⁹ The murder of al-Amīn fulfills all the essential elements of this historiographical paradigm, but the story has a more fundamental significance in Islamic history beyond dramatizing a crucial political event or alluding to the political ambivalence of ninth-century Islamic society. The murder wraps up the story of the 'Abbāsīd family in moral terms, and as such heralds the close of a phase of Islamic religio-historical experience that had been fermenting throughout the previous decades of confrontation between the Hashemites and their opponents.

The tragedy of al-Amīn's reign forms a coherent set of representations that formed part of a wider drama that was the larger goal of the narrators. It was the drama of the civil war itself that, like al-Amīn's murder, suggested moral and historical meanings beyond the event's immediate political significance. Viewed from a distant and abstract position, the war represented for the chroniclers a guiding force behind the plot of 'Abbāsīd history. It attracted attention for its confusing moral questions, its signs about the fate of the community, and the tragic, inexorable road it paved to division and conflict. The tension between the brothers was uniquely important because it was happening in the sphere of Islamic history which, according to orthodox historiography, heralded the course of universal history. The revolution's chroniclers sought from early on to show that the establishment of 'Abbāsīd rule was illustrative of an idealist epoch mirroring the righteous stability of previous prophetic eras, and their attempts were later matched by the civil war chroniclers' attempts to show how the Islamic community after Hārūn al-Rashīd was an equal example of the dissolution of a chosen community. Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Amīn, and al-Ma'mūn came together to personify the society's hour of crisis. As a family they interacted in a way that made them into a microcosm of the Islamic *umma*. Arab-Persian rivalries, class rivalries, suspicions of political disloyalty, and concerns about religious faithfulness were abbreviated by the jealousy between the brothers and the escalating bursts of recrimination between them.

As *imāms* and members of the Prophet's family, the 'Abbāsīd caliphs qualified to function as key actors in the paradigmatic scheme of history. And much as the histories of pre-Islamic societies were described in the Qur'ān primarily through the life experiences of God's selected human examples such as Adam, Noah, and Abraham, so was the history of Islamic society in the 'Abbāsīd age told through the tragedies of members of the caliphal family, primarily al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. The fate of Islamic history now revolved around those two figures, much as in ancient times the history of religions and civilizations centered on critical moments of human confrontation that were interpreted either as the triumph of good over evil or as inexplicable plots in human history.

⁶⁹ Michael Walzer (ed.), *Regicide and Revolution, Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (Cambridge, 1974), 3.

We can glimpse this attempt to establish a parallel between 'Abbāsīd history and the stories of prophets in the following anecdote, assigned by the narrators to the reign of al-Rashīd. In the course of his description of al-Rashīd's succession plan of AH 186, which partitioned the empire between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, Mas'ūdī throws in a story on the authority of a certain Sa'īd b. 'Amīr al-Baṣrī, who states that he was told the following by Ibn 'Amīr:

I happened to be on the pilgrimage of [the year of the succession arrangements], and I noticed how the news of the succession covenant with its oaths and conditions bewildered people. A man from [the tribe of] Hudhayl who was passing by with his camel started reciting:

What a covenant that whose oaths are broken
And a conflict whose fire is sure to intensify

Hearing this, I said: "Woe to you man, what is that you are saying?" "I say that the swords shall be unsheathed, conflict shall break out, and kingship will surely be contested," he said. "How do you know that?" I asked. "Verily, don't you see the camel standing still, the two men are arguing, and the two ravens are wallowing in blood? By God," he said, "this matter shall only lead to conflict and evil."⁷⁰

Read on its own, this anecdote only shows a tendentious view of the civil war. The purpose of this story, however, was not so much to craft an obvious hagiography as to provide a symbolic view of the place of the civil war in history. The reference to bloodstained ravens was probably intended to evoke the memory of the Qur'ānic reference to ravens in the story of Abel and Cain. There we are told that, after murdering Abel, Cain was immediately gripped with guilt over the deed. As the corpse of Abel lay exposed on the ground, Cain observed a raven nearby, tenderly attending to the burial of a dead raven. Cain sorrowfully expressed his shame at leaving his brother's body exposed while a mere raven was conscious of his responsibility toward a fellow member of his species.⁷¹ The parallel with the story of the civil war becomes straightforward: al-Amīn's and al-Ma'mūn's fates are being compared to the relation between Abel and Cain. The raven connection could lead one to assume that the story was largely a subtle indictment of al-Ma'mūn. This no doubt forms part of the allegorical intention, but the story conveys mainly moral-historical connotations.

Given the unique background of the brothers, the story of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, like that of Abel and Cain, allowed religious observers to use the story on occasion for reflecting on both the process of social change and on how human nature can be swayed during man's intellectual interaction with nature and his evolving sense of self-definition. On this level of historical perception, the interactions of the two people were sufficient to illustrate the pos-

⁷⁰ *Murūj*, IV, 214–15. On the raven's symbolic character, see Khaṭīb, XI, 232.

⁷¹ Cain's words upon seeing the raven are, "Woe to me! Am I unable to be as this raven, and so bury my brother's corpse?" (Qur'ān 5:31).

sible directions of human intentions as they would be hammered out in nature. The quest for self-esteem (cast in terms of competition for divine favor in the story of Abel and Cain) and uniqueness of identity, and the eventual use of this nurtured sense for domination of others, are elements that lie at the heart of both stories. Cain's mortal sin lies not only in his jealousy toward his brother when the fire consumes the lamb Abel presents and rejects the grain presented by Cain, but is anchored more importantly in Cain's arrogance (*ghalaba 'alayhi l-kibar, wa istahwadha 'alayhi al-shaytān*), which was Satan's prime flaw. Ṭabarī tells us that Cain considered himself superior to Abel, because the latter was considered earth-born whereas he, Cain, had been born in heaven (*wa raghiba [Qābīl] bi-ukhtihi 'an Hābīl wa qāl: "naḥnu wilādāt al-janna wa huwa min wilādati l-arḍ"*).⁷² This comparative assessment and haughty self-perception led Cain to reject his sister's proposed marriage to Abel. Considering himself more worthy of her, Cain had sought to marry his own sister, which brought him additional religious admonishment, until finally the sacrifice happened and Cain followed it by murdering Abel. In the end, Abel was helpless vis-à-vis his more powerful brother, and the matter was solved only by divine favor of Abel over Cain, which clarified the moral in the rivalry and its tragic end.

With its stronger and more readily accessible historical roots, the story of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn offered a similar, albeit more complex, plot of such a primordial rivalry. The historical particularities of the Amīn–Ma'mūn story further expanded the directions of meaning into social, political, and regional arenas. The story provided a living adaptation of the Qur'ānic paradigm. And just as Abel's was the first murder in human history that domesticated violence as a human quality, thereby breaking the harmony of an earlier community, al-Amīn's murder was the first incident of caliphal murder since the coming of the 'Abbāsīd order. The community's view that the revolution had brought about a new era marked by religious and political stability in Islamic society was now either altered or brought to a conclusive end.

Given the negative assessment of Cain's claim to a superior lineage and his act of murder, one might well find the comparison with the Amīn–Ma'mūn story twisted. After all, it was al-Amīn who claimed or was portrayed to have claimed to be of more noble lineage, and it was al-Ma'mūn, the deprived, who survived the war. But it would be wrong to assume that the narrators intended a linear correspondence between the two narratives and their historical actors. The imagery of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn's story not only underwent editing over the years, but it was also intentionally crafted within ambiguous and shifting tracks of correspondence. The reader was expected to shuffle materials from the two histories in a way that explored the complex, more general phenomenon of integration, variable recurrence and dialogue in double and multiple plots. Ṭabarī must have been keen on showing how art blended with

⁷² Ṭabarī, I, 141.

morality in the evolution and growing irony of the religio-historical plot. Given al-Amīn's violent death, one cannot doubt that the evocation of the Abel–Cain story was meant to elicit a comparison between Cain and al-Ma'mūn.⁷³

The construction of a universal view of history based on the axis of analogy between the pairs of brothers produced a political and religious view of al-Ma'mūn that, needless to say, was hardly flattering. Al-Ma'mūn, like Cain, came across as a jealous brother eager to acquire divine favor in the form of earthly power at any cost. We may not know exactly who developed the Abel–Amīn connection in this anecdote, but the story is clearly supportive of the status quo. With its decidedly anti-Ma'mūn signs, this story and its overarching religio-historical vision could not go unanswered. The pro-Ma'mūn faction set out to craft an alternative paradigm of historical allegory which placed the civil war in a symbolic plot favorable to al-Ma'mūn. According to this view, the episode of regicide, as well as the relation of the brothers to their family, now needed to be read in relation to another axis of analogy, this time evoking the roles of Ismā'īl and Ishāq in the life of Abraham. The pro-Ma'mūn tradition sought to cast the question of worthiness for caliphal succession in terms of the historical selection of one of Abraham's children for sacrifice. Which of the brothers had been chosen as the sacrifice and ultimately survived in a sign of divine preference now became a matter laden with political connotations relevant to the 'Abbāsīd succession after al-Rashīd.

This pro-Ma'mūnid tradition is preserved in the work of Mas'ūdī who, in the course of recounting the dispute between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, interrupts his narrative to provide a story that reexamines an exegetical religious point. The issue in question concerns the story of Abraham and whether the Qur'ān specifies which of Abraham's sons was the subject of the story of sacrifice. Mas'ūdī's story goes as follows:

Umm Ja'far [Zubayda] had long spurned al-Rashīd, refusing to bear him any children. [Hārūn] lamented this state of affairs and sought the advice of a wise man among his companions. [The man] suggested that he should seek to make her jealous, for Abraham had faced a similar problem with Sāra. But once Hajar, whom Sāra had presented to him, gave birth to Ismā'īl, Sāra became jealous and bore [Abraham] Ishāq. Al-Rashīd thus procured al-Ma'mūn's mother, who bore him al-Ma'mūn. Once this occurred, Umm Ja'far became jealous and soon conceived Muḥammad (al-Amīn) in her turn.

[Al-Mas'ūdī then relates:] We have already earlier referred to the debate over this matter, that is, to the story of Abraham, Ismā'īl, and Ishāq; those who say that it was Ishāq who was to be sacrificed, and those who say that it was Ismā'īl; and the argument of each side. On this matter both the ancients and their descendants have continued to engage in debate. On this subject, there is the story of 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās and

⁷³ The age of Cain, set at twenty-five when the murder took place, may have been approximated in connection with the age of the brothers as well: Ṭabarī, I, 144.

his debate with his client (*mawlā*) ‘Ikrima, the author of the exegetical work. ‘Ikrima had asked Ibn ‘Abbās, “Who was the one to be sacrificed?” Ibn ‘Abbās said, “Ismā‘īl,” and he supported this position by citing the words of God, the Glorious and the Almighty: “And after Ishāq there will be Ya‘qūb.” [Qur’ān 11:71] “Do you not notice how God gave Abraham good tidings about the birth of Ishāq? So how could he command him to sacrifice [Ishāq]?” Ibn ‘Abbās said. To this ‘Ikrima answered, “I shall prove to you from the Qur’an that it was Ishāq who was to be the sacrifice,” and he cited the words of God, the Glorious and the Almighty: “Thus will your Lord choose you and teach you the interpretation of stories [and events] and perfect His favor to you and to the posterity of Ya‘qūb – even as He perfected it to your fathers Abraham and Ishāq aforetime.” [Qur’an, 12:6] [‘Ikrima continued] “So His favor (*ni‘ma*) to Abraham was the rescue from the fire, and His favor to Ishāq was the rescue from sacrifice.” ‘Ikrima, *mawlā* of Ibn ‘Abbās, died in AH 105, and his *kunya* was Abū ‘Abdallāh.⁷⁴

Mas‘ūdī’s introduction about Zubayda and Hārūn al-Rashīd sets the stage for comparison of the story of Hārūn’s family with Abraham’s. The introduction of the story makes more sense in light of the frequent observation in medieval sources that al-Amīn was of noble lineage, an Arab and Hashemite on both parents’ sides, while al-Ma’mūn was born of a Persian concubine who died immediately after giving birth. Far from using this juxtaposition of lineage to praise al-Amīn, the sources provide it as background to illustrate that an Arab lineage is not a guarantee of personal virtue or sound decision making. Al-Rashīd is shown in various anecdotes demonstrating to Zubayda that al-Ma’mūn is more worthy of succession, yet he is leaving al-Amīn as the first successor in light of the pressure of the pro-Hashemite camp of the Abnā’. Were we to establish a strict comparison from the present anecdote between Hārūn’s story and Abraham’s, then Zubayda, Hārūn’s only wife, and her son al-Amīn would symbolize the parallel to Sāra and Ishāq, while al-Ma’mūn would symbolize Ismā‘īl. In class terms, the comparison might stand, since Hājar was a concubine like al-Ma’mūn’s mother, but in genealogical terms – the more significant side of the story in the present context – it would not hold. For al-Ma’mūn, as a Persian, could not really posture as the parallel to or descendant of Ismā‘īl. The fact that al-Amīn, an Arab, ended up as caliph demanded a new reading of the story of sacrifice, a reading that would not strengthen al-Amīn’s genealogical and religious merit. That there were divergent Islamic opinions about which of Abraham’s sons was chosen for the trial is evident in various texts, but the position supporting the argument for Ishāq in the above story bears a political significance associated with the civil war.⁷⁵ For, elsewhere in his work, Mas‘ūdī tells us that it is generally believed that the Persian people are descended from Ishāq.⁷⁶ Al-Ma’mūn’s link with

⁷⁴ *Murūj*, IV, 265–66.

⁷⁵ R. Dagon places the divergence in Islamic opinion over the identity of the intended sacrifice among Abraham’s sons in the context of the *shu‘ūbiyya* debates of the later ninth century: René Dagon, *La Geste d’Ismaël d’après l’onomastique et la tradition arabes* (Geneva and Paris, 1981), 220–34. ⁷⁶ *Murūj*, I, 280; also Abū Nu‘aym, *Akhbār Ishbahān*, I, 11.

Persian society and culture is therefore extended from this evidence to a symbolic link between al-Ma'mūn and Ishāq.

The view that Ishāq was the subject of the story of sacrifice then translates to the historical comment that just as Ishāq, and in turn the Persian people, were chosen in ancient times as the objects of divine favor, so were they manifestly selected after the civil war through al-Ma'mūn's victory as leader of the community.⁷⁷ Al-Ma'mūn's victory in the civil war now marks a rescue from death, as with Ishāq, and therefore connotes the restoration of an original historical signal, even if in the "short-term" perspective his victory entailed the overthrow of a Hashemite. However, since al-Ma'mūn was also a Hashemite on his father's side, Mas'ūdī could hint that it was also a Hashemite who was saved, thus upholding a continuity in the 'Abbāsīd and prophetically linked caliphal order. To establish the connection between all three stories (those of the sons of Adam, Abraham, and Hārūn), we need to examine a motif that functioned as a bridge among them – the image of the lamb. Ṭabarī tells us that the lamb Abel sacrificed for God was accepted and kept until the day Abraham attempted to "sacrifice his son Ishāq" (*fa-lam yazal dhalika l-kibsh mahbūsan 'inda allāh 'azza wa jall hattā akhrajahu fidā' Ishāq*).⁷⁸ One cannot but be surprised at how Ṭabarī, who surveys all interpretations of the sacrifice story – both those that say Ismā'īl was the sacrifice and those that say it was Ishāq – commits himself so directly to the Ishāq view. Such indeed was the perception in later times, that Ṭabarī believed Ishāq was the subject of the sacrifice story.⁷⁹ This attachment of Ṭabarī to Ishāq goes back to his view that the Persian people were descended or associated in some way with Ishāq.

The continuity of the lamb motif from the story of Cain and Abel to the story of Abraham and Ishāq takes on added significance in the narrative of the Islamic caliphate, in view of the pervasive association of certain leading political figures with the sign of the ram. On the day that the caliph al-Manṣūr made his final assault on Abū Muslim, Ṭabarī narrates, Ismā'īl b. 'Alī, the caliph's uncle, happened to call on al-Manṣūr. When Ismā'īl told the caliph,

⁷⁷ In this vein, one could cast a different reading of some usages of the name Ishāq. Before he gained his *kunya* as "Abū Muslim," the chief military leader of the 'Abbāsīd revolution was known as "Abū Ishāq," while his name was "Ibrāhīm." The 'Abbāsīd Ibrāhīm al-imām had allegedly changed both the name and the *kunya* of the commander to 'Abd al-Raḥmān, and Abū Muslim respectively (M. Sharon, *Black Banners from the East: The Establishment of the 'Abbasid State – Incubation of a Revolt* [Jerusalem and Leiden, 1983], 214). Viewed in light of the above discussion on Ishāq, one can postulate that the attribution of "Abū Ishāq" as an early *kunya* for Abū Muslim and its later transformation were meant in the sources to show the transition in the symbolic function of Abū Muslim from that of a leader of the Persian people to that of a leader of a millennial Muslim community.

⁷⁸ Ṭabarī, I, 139. The same report and chain of narrators is in Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, IV, 537. In another report, however, Ṭabarī provides a more ambiguous version, which states that once the sacrifice was accepted, the lamb grazed in heaven until it was released to ransom "the son of Abraham": Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, IV, 527.

⁷⁹ Al-Damīrī, *Hayāt al-Hayawān*, II, 366. See, also Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabīh*, Qur'an 37:99–113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989), 124–25.

“O Commander of the Faithful, I have seen this night [in a dream] that you have slaughtered a ram and that I stepped on it,” al-Manṣūr said, “Then rise and make your dream a reality, O Abū’l-Ḥasan. God has killed the heretic (*al-fāsiq*).”⁸⁰ A similar association of a Persian commander with the ram motif surfaces in al-Amīn’s reign, when Mas‘ūdī quotes Sulaymān b. al-Manṣūr as saying, “May God’s curse be upon the treacherous one [i.e., al-Amīn]. He has brought nothing but trouble upon the umma with his treachery and bad judgement. Verily God has shown him distant from the correct path of the righteous people (*ab‘adahu allāh min sunnati ahl l-faḍl*),⁸¹ and He has provided support for al-Ma’mūn through the [help of] the ram of the east” (*kibsh al-mashriq*).” (Mas‘ūdī adds that this means Ṭāhir.)⁸² The linkage of both Abū Muslim and Ṭāhir to the ram motif may have signified on one level the exploitation of these leaders as scapegoats by their superiors, but in another way the event carried an expiatory signification, as it was a controversial Iranian figure on both occasions who acted as the sacrifice to ensure the progress of the Islamic state.⁸³ And hence one cannot but speculate that Ṭabarī must have seen a link between the role of the ram in the biblical plot and the ram in the ‘Abbāsīd one. Previous genealogical and tribal objectives in the narrative were adapted to suit political and cultural considerations in the ninth century.

⁸⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 116; al-Balādhurī, *Banū al-‘Abbās*, 206.

⁸¹ The phrase here contains a further pro-Persian pun, which could mean al-Faḍl b. Sahl in the usage of the word *al-faḍl* (merit, guidance), and could then mean the Persian people in the expression *ahl al-faḍl*.⁸² *Murūj*, IV, 273.

⁸³ Ṭāhir and Abū Muslim are also tied together in the pattern of their careers. Their stories coincide at a particular point just after they attain victory for their suzerains. Hoping to be appointed to govern Khurāsān, each of the commanders is spurned by the caliph, who appoints him to a post in Syria. Abū Muslim, in the aftermath of that appointment, is said to have commented, “How could he [i.e., al-Manṣūr] appoint me to the areas of Syria and Egypt, when Khurāsān should be mine?” (*Huwa yuwallīnī al-Shām wa Miṣr, wa Khurāsān lī?*)” (Ṭabarī, III, 103). The Cairo edition of Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh* substitutes Jazīra for *Miṣr*. Ṭāhir voices a similar sentiment just after he is appointed by al-Ma’mūn to the province of Raqqā, where he was instructed to organize an expedition against Naṣr b. Shabath. At the time, Ṭāhir complained, “I defeated a caliph, and brought the title to another caliph, and then I get ordered to do this? Even a commander among my troops would have sufficed to handle this matter” (Ṭabarī, III, 1043).

Al-Mutawakkil: an encore of the family tragedy

The succession transition

On one of his many excursions, Hārūn al-Rashīd one day, it is said, decided to take his children on a hunting venture into the countryside. Eager to observe their ingenuity and skill, he gave each sufficient weapons and sent them on independent trails to fetch something on their own. At the end of the day, after everyone had returned from their hunting, the caliph expressed his interest in examining the accomplishments of his sons. As he began the review, he must have found some catches sufficiently impressive before it became clear that members of his entourage were scrambling to hide something from him. At the end of the line, the little one, Muḥammad (the future al-Mu‘taṣim), it seemed, had only managed that day to come back with an owl. Since the owl conjured up images of ill-omen, the servants were afraid to reveal it to the caliph, lest the latter vent his anger on the child and/or on those around, and thereby end the entire sojourn on a sour note. Inevitably, however, Mu‘taṣim’s turn came up and, after some inquiry, and considerable trepidation, the servants relented and revealed the hefty arrow-pierced bird. A few moments of silence then passed before the caliph suddenly, and to everyone’s surprise, brightly congratulated his son on his achievement, then turned to those around, laughed, and solemnly prophesied: “Verily, he shall succeed to the caliphate, and he shall find his supporters to be a people whose visages look like the face of this owl. He shall rebuild an ancient site, and settle it with these people.”¹ Hārūn’s prophecies had a tendency to fall on the mark, and this one was no different, but in the long term it was in fact no reason for cheer.

Whether due to his youth or other factors, al-Mu‘taṣim was never part of al-Rashīd’s original succession plan drafted between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn. When the day – and a mysterious one this was – came for him to succeed al-Ma’mūn, al-Mu‘taṣim probably fulfilled al-Rashīd’s expectations of giving the caliphate stern political leadership which kept the empire’s frontiers secure and insured effective administration in the provinces. Parting direction with his predecessors, al-Mu‘taṣim, however, relied in his military affairs entirely on

¹ Aḥmad b. Abī Ya‘qūb al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1892), 257.

the Turkish troops he had begun to recruit during the last years of al-Ma'mūn's reign. And it was to these troops that al-Rashīd was referring when he spoke of his son rebuilding an ancient site (Sāmarrā') and settling it with a new group of supporters. Throughout his reign, al-Mu'taṣim managed to keep the burgeoning Turkish army under his close control. A key reason behind this lay in the fact that the Turkish troops held a direct loyalty to him as their original patron, who had consistently protected their interests in the face of older political and military elites, such as the Abnā' and the Tāhirids. During his lifetime, we begin to hear about the distinctions of his new commanders, Afshīn, Ashinās, and Itākh, and a slew of lower-ranking ones, such as Waṣīf and Bughā, who would rise further after his death. After his relatively short reign, these troops continued their loyal service to his short-reigned successor, his son al-Wāthiq. Al-Wāthiq's succession may have been through an original designation by his father, which could explain the stable political commitment that his commanders continued to show to the 'Abbāsīd ruler. It was upon al-Wāthiq's death, however, that discord began to set in, and this may have been connected with the fact that that caliph did not choose a successor or died before he could give thought to the matter.² The lack of a clear succession will, however flawed, undermined the institutional character of the political leadership, and blurred the lines between the military and political authorities. Whether al-Mutawakkil's succession included an element of political intrigue, involving the increasingly menacing Turkish commanders, cannot be definitively established. The sources assign great credit to the late caliph's chief judge and vizir, Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād, for saving the day by insuring a quiet succession for al-Mu'taṣim's other son, al-Mutawakkil. It was during the course of this caliph's reign, however, that the 'Abbāsīd house definitively began its fall into political disarray and fragmentation.

The narratives of al-Mutawakkil's reign:

The reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil occupies a literary and thematic centrality in the history of the Sāmarran caliphate that mirrors the meaning and structure of al-Rashīd's reign in the earlier caliphate of Baghdad. Just as the story of Hārūn represents a point of intellectual and moral reference for later developments, the reign of al-Mutawakkil seems to mark a new threshold that initiates, controls, and channels the way an analogous historical drama is about to unfold among al-Mutawakkil's heirs in later years. Once again, the story is ordered around specific characters – family members, vizirs, and commanders – who occupy roles that interact in a way that never fully resolves one political problem without engendering another ethical crisis. Protagonists are ordered along lines of moral, religious, and political division in a hierarchical way from the caliph down to his subordinates. A central confrontation

² Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 483.

between two figures, a previous moral culprit and a new hero, usually culminates with the vivid downfall of a character who finally seems to reach the end of his thematic role, and ready to accept and recognize the necessity for his downfall. From the reign of al-Manṣūr down to al-Muhtadī this tragic trajectory in the 'Abbāsīd narrative is studded with such characters: Abū Muslim, Ja'far al-Barmakī, al-Amīn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl, Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, 'Alī b. Hishām, Afshīn, Itākh, Bāghir, and Utāmish are some of the key characters around whom the narrative of one reign or another is organized.

Al-Mutawakkil's rise to power (and even fall) is organized in a way that is in many ways symmetrical to the shape of al-Rashīd's early political career. Like Hārūn's, al-Mutawakkil's ascent to the throne was a highly unlikely event given the tremendous prejudice that his predecessor, a brother caliph, harbored toward him. We get a clear indication that al-Wāthiq simply did not like Ja'far (al-Mutawakkil). Following his paternal instincts, al-Wāthiq was eager that the throne pass to his own infant son, Muḥammad, rather than to his brother, a trend familiar to us from the earlier record of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs.³

Purely out of political jealousy, therefore, we see al-Wāthiq intensifying his hostility toward al-Mutawakkil, and ignoring in the process the danger of grooming a minor for succession. Al-Mutawakkil, like Hārūn, seems to have had an auspicious dream that prophesied his future rise to the caliphate,⁴ which made al-Wāthiq, like al-Hādī before, grow even more anxious about the future and bitter toward his brother. The story then picks up a new level of moral and social significance when we learn that the caliph made no effort to keep his hostility confined within the privacy of the family but let his subordinates become fully aware of his animosity. As the vizir Ibn al-Rabī' had tried to curry favor with al-Amīn, so did the ambitious Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik b. al-Zayyāt encourage al-Wāthiq to press forward with the designation of his son for succession. The first signs of those old moral breaches were now beginning to resurface in the new state established by al-Mu'taṣim.

To protect himself, al-Mutawakkil was now forced to rely on the influence of other ministers at court in the hope that the latter could help affect a rapprochement between the heir apparent and his brother. Aside from the way this event in and of itself is represented by the chroniclers as an unusual situation, Ibn al-Zayyāt dealt an additional humiliation to the grandson of Hārūn by sarcastically rebuffing him. 'Umar b. Faraj al-Rukhājī, the court's financial official put in charge of dispensing the stipends for members of the 'Abbāsīd family, threw in his share of insults by refusing to expedite a financial request of al-Mutawakkil.⁵ All the steps toward a disorder in the natural system of the state had thus fallen in place: the caliph breaking with the proper code of

³ S. Miah, *The Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan Publication 24 (Dacca 1969), 18. Although the evidence on al-Wāthiq's grooming of his son is scant, it was no doubt a factor in shaping the initial investiture of his infant son, Muḥammad, with the caliphate before it was later reversed by Ibn Abī Du'ād: Ṭabarī, III, 1368–69; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārīb*, 536.

⁴ Khaṭīb, VII, 165; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam*, XI, 179. ⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 1371.

courtly behavior, bureaucrats intruding into the private affairs of the caliph's family, and men of low origins, such as Ibn al-Zayyāt (like al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī before), rising to become vizirs without adjusting to the moral responsibility that their new office called for.

Throughout these narratives set at the end of al-Wāthiq's reign, we see a vivid contrast between the arrogant confidence of al-Wāthiq, which is predicated on a sense of power, and the humility of al-Mutawakkil, who is shown at a still tender age driven by a simple sense of loyalty and affection for his kindred and superior. The descriptions of the above-mentioned incidents, which are couched in an autobiographical testimony, vividly evoke al-Mutawakkil's anguish and sense of frustration. Faced with abuse even from the bureaucratic officials, al-Mutawakkil turned to his friends at court. Aḥmad b. Khālīd consoled him by telling him that 'Umar was known to behave in a rude manner to everyone, while Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād, a renowned specialist in mediating compromises and inculcating virtue into the most poisoned circumstances, promised to take up the matter directly with the caliph to help revive goodwill between the two.⁶ Predictably, we are shown that Ibn Abī Du'ād made good on his promise, and that al-Wāthiq promised him he would "forgive" al-Mutawakkil (a concession made largely in deference to Ibn Abī Du'ād and his mediation effort),⁷ but that al-Wāthiq later ignored (or forgot) his promise. If anything, al-Wāthiq seems to have intensified his hostility. On one occasion, al-Mutawakkil decided to take the initiative for reconciliation directly; he tidied his appearance in a way that he thought would please the caliph – he wore fresh black garb and a new hairdo – and attempted a respectful visit to the caliph, but he was in for a surprise. This time al-Wāthiq stunned al-Mutawakkil by ordering Ibn al-Zayyāt to ruin al-Mutawakkil's appearance, have the prominent locks of his hair cut off and tossed in his face. Broken and defeated, al-Mutawakkil may have thought he had hit rock bottom when the caliph next threw him into prison, partly to thwart the dream prophecy.

Now al-Mutawakkil had reached a moment that was an identical replay of Hārūn's perilous hour of imprisonment with Yaḥyā at the end of al-Hādī's reign. When al-Mutawakkil was denied his stipend by 'Umar b. Faraj some time before, Aḥmad b. Khālīd had extended a loan to al-Mutawakkil, consoled him, and suggested that he make do with the meager sum until God devised relief from these straits ("*hattā yuhayyī 'allāh l-faraj*").⁸ This relief finally came when al-Wāthiq suddenly died, and the various vizirs and commanders began discussing the issue of succession to the throne. Al-Mutawakkil was by no means a likely candidate. His nomination soon after was partly an accident, and partly a further gesture of sympathy from Ibn Abī Du'ād who put forward al-Mutawakkil's name. Above all, the sources seem to

⁶ Ibid.: Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 537.

⁷ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, VI, 83.

⁸ There is a slight pun here on the name of 'Umar b. Faraj who is a key source of trouble.

be keen on showing al-Mutawakkil's accession as an act of destiny. The elevation of a man from a condition of despair to one of triumph and majesty was a sign of the responsive and antithetical course that history can assume.

This initial phase in al-Mutawakkil's political career and his transformation from defeat to victory overnight provides a crucial frame for moral contrast with later events. The reader is gradually invited to examine how al-Mutawakkil adjusted to his newfound power, and how he embarked on a path of confidence but eventually became guided by ambition, personal bias, and indulgence and ended up no different from his predecessors. Al-Mutawakkil began his reign by taking revenge on those who had earlier caused him grief, such as Ibn al-Zayyāt and 'Umar b. Faraj. In a lengthy moralizing narrative we are shown how Ibn al-Zayyāt received a punishment that corresponded to his actions.⁹ From the punishment itself to the scolding words that he was made to hear in his final days, Ibn al-Zayyāt's death is meant to echo the torment that he brought to his victims in years past. He was made to undergo prolonged torture not only to maintain a physical balance between his situation and that of his victims, but also to give him an extended opportunity to reflect on his fate and the danger of associating with circles of power. He uttered various lines of poetry that suggest his repentance and provide the central conclusion of a tragic end – the victim's recognition of judgment and the fatal impermanence of the state of power and control, such as when he states:

So does life turn from day to day
like a vision that a dreamer has in sleep
Do not lose heart, and take patience
For the world but moves from some to others¹⁰

While al-Mutawakkil functions dramatically as a marker for the closing of the careers of villains, his own life seems to develop in a flawed and unwitting way. The caliph, for example, very quickly adjusts to the ambience of courtly intrigue intertwined with wine parties, and begins plotting even against those who helped him to power, such as Itākh and Waṣīf. Itākh, a leading Turkish commander, whose character harbors little virtue as he is sent around to carry out all sorts of violent acts ordered by the caliphs, suffers an end that embodies a key form of response to the rampant ambition of the Turkish troops and their general lack of moral outlook on the course of events. Al-Mutawakkil is able to express deference to his subordinates, such as when he tells Itākh, "You are my father and you have reared me,"¹¹ in the manner that Hārūn had earlier addressed Yaḥyā, but is shown equally capable of ignoring the significance of these ties with a single transformation of his attitude.

Despite the ingenious guile employed by both the caliph and the Ṭāhirid governor of Baghdad, Ishāq b. Muṣ'ab, which brought about the arrest and

⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 1374–76. ¹⁰ *Murūj*, V, 7.

¹¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1383; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 82; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 542.

imprisonment of Itākh, few tears are shed in the sources over the downfall of a commander who stood for nothing beside the implementation of violence for the various ends of his ambitious superiors. In the story of al-Mutawakkil's reign, the fall of Itākh, along with that of Ibn al-Zayyāt, marks a critical turning point in the moral and political potentialities of the state. The 'Abbāsīd family, it seems, was now ready to turn a new leaf that would set it free from the detrimental influence of these two power-hungry figures. Al-Mutawakkil was now ready to lay a new course for the state, as al-Ma'mūn did after the elimination of Faḍl b. Sahl and Tāhir b. al-Ḥusayn. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the year after Itākh's fall, the caliph announced his succession plans in a document that charted a path of succession among his three sons, al-Muntaṣir, al-Mu'tazz, and al-Mu'ayyad. The sequence of these events suggests that the caliph viewed the removal of Itākh as an important step in insuring that the latter would not alter the succession in favor of one candidate over another. However, in representing these events, narrators probably also intended us to see how the 'Abbāsīd family would fare on its own, without the risks of negative interference from the leading Turkish commander and how a different set of factors and new motives would bring about the undoing of the plan.

The problem of succession

In the year AH 235/AD 849, al-Mutawakkil announced his plans for succession in a document that he drafted among his three children, declaring his son al-Muntaṣir, who was still thirteen years old, his first successor, to be followed by al-Mu'tazz, who was four, and the latter to be followed by Mu'ayyad.¹² In addition to the plans for caliphal succession, al-Mutawakkil's covenant designated three spheres of authority for the children which were at the time nominal regencies in the caliph's reign, but were expected to grow into autonomous zones for each after al-Mutawakkil's death. Al-Muntaṣir was assigned the regions of Egypt, North Africa, Arabia, al-Jibal, the eastern cities of Iṣfahān, Qumm, Qazwīn, Qāshān, al-Šāmighān, Māsabadhān, Sharazūr, the regions of Sind and Makrān, and the central caliphal lands in Iraq including the districts of Qinnasrīn, al-ʿAwāšim, al-Thughūr al-Šāmiyya wa'l-Jaziriyya, Diyār Muḍar, Diyār Rabīʿa, Mosul, and the various upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. To al-Mu'tazz went the districts (*kuwar*) of Khurāsān and the areas of Ṭabaristān, Rayy, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the districts of Fars. Finally, the caliph assigned al-Mu'ayyad the districts (*jund*) of Damascus, Himṣ, al-Urdunn, and Filasṭīn. The caliph placed restrictions preventing his successor al-Muntaṣir from interfering in the autonomy of the two other heirs, and laid down reciprocal duties for al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad.

¹² Al-Mu'ayyad's age is unknown, since the sources do not give the year of his birth. However, from the order of succession one can assume that he was younger than or the same age as al-Mu'tazz.

They were to provide “obedience (*al-sam‘ wa’l-tā‘a*), sincere counsel (*naṣīḥa*), and alliance with al-Muntaṣir’s friends and enmity toward his foes (*al-mushāya‘ awa’l-muwālāt li-awliyā’ihi wa’l-mu‘ādāt li-a’dā’ihi*). . . . [they were also ordered] to show loyalty to his investiture (*al-tamassuk bi-bay‘atihi wa’l-wafā’ bi-‘ahdihī*)...[not] seek his ruin, nor endeavour to deceive him or make common cause against him.”¹³

In turn al-Muntaṣir was ordered

to fulfill what the caliph had stipulated for them (*al-wafā’ bi-mā ‘aqadahu lahumā*), and that he would not attempt to renounce any one of them, nor make an investiture excluding any one of them, be it by rendering the oath of allegiance to a son of his or to anyone else among all mankind (*an lā yakhla‘humā . . . wa lā ya‘qud dūnahumā bay‘atan li-waladin wa lā li-aḥadin min jamī‘ l-bariyya*) . . . [nor could he] violate any of the arrangements concerning the offices that the [caliph] has assigned to each of them (*a‘mālihimā*), including: [the supervision of] prayer, police services, judgeships, *mazālim* courts, taxes, estates, booty, income from alms taxes, and other privileges of their offices, and the office of each of them, including post, [the monopoly on] embroidery (*turuz*), the treasury, subsidies, the mint houses, and the office that the Commander of the Faithful has assigned and will assign to each of them.”¹⁴

The document binds the three successors in a covenant of allegiance to these stipulations, and forbids any party from violating the clauses. Although the arrangement does not specify penalties for violation, the caliph makes faithfulness to it a moral and religious duty safeguarded by God. In conclusion, the caliph states, “God is sufficient as witness and helper to whoever obeys hopefully and is faithful to His compact out of fear and after taking careful measure. God punishes those who oppose Him or strive to shun His command.”¹⁵

The striking aspect of this succession document from an initial glance is its resemblance to the succession covenant of Hārūn al-Rashīd, drafted half a century earlier. The covenants concur in the way the line of succession is distributed among three heirs, and the way the empire is divided into three autonomous territorial zones among the three heirs after the caliph’s death. To each party both documents assign specific rights and powers in his newly established sphere of dominion. Both documents are couched in a moral-political language that revolves around key moral concepts, such as the need to fulfill covenants (*al-wafā’ bi’l-‘ahd*), the duty of political allegiance (*al-tā‘a*), and the need to provide a singular and wholehearted communion with the ruling family that is threatened by personal ambition or temptations caused by seditious invitations brought by commanders and other subordinates. In both documents there is a strong condemnation of violation of oaths of allegiance (*nakhth*) and other moves to alter a received covenant, such as *‘isyān* (mutiny), *khal‘* (rebellion, deposition of the caliph), *taghyīr* (change of principles),

¹³ Tabarī, III, 1397; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 98.

¹⁴ Tabarī, III, 1397–98; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 99.

¹⁵ Tabarī, III, 1401. Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 103.

intiqās (reduced loyalty, infringement), *mukhālafa* (difference of opinion or action, challenge), *ghadr* (treachery), *ghishsh* (cheating), or *tabdīl* (replacing something, modifying). The last term, which may seem less offensive than others used to characterize open breaches, is associated in al-Mutawakkil's covenant with a Qur'ānic verse that makes even a slight alteration in allegiance a religious offense. Thus, after expounding al-Mu'tazz's share of the duty of fulfilling a similar binding covenant to that of his successor al-Mu'ayyad, the document reads, "Then if any alter it having heard it, the guilt rests upon those who alter it; verily God is One Who hears and knows."¹⁶

The two documents reach a particular confluence in theme and style in the section that describes the duties that the first successor is supposed to fulfill to his two brothers and successors during his lifetime. Al-Mutawakkil's document reads:

Abū 'Abdallāh al-Mu'tazz . . . and Ibrāhīm al-Mu'ayyad . . . have a guarantee of safe-conduct from Muḥammad al-Muntaṣir . . . whether one or both of them are staying with him or are absent from him . . . It is incumbent upon Muḥammad al-Muntaṣir . . . to transfer Abū 'Abdallāh al-Mu'tazz . . . to Khurāsān and its adjacent dependencies, those falling within the jurisdiction of Khurāsānī rule, and to deliver to him the governorship of Khurāsān and all of its provinces (*a'māl*) and districts (*ajnād*), as well as the subdistricts (*kuwar*) . . . Al-Muntaṣir shall not keep Abu 'Abdallāh from them or detain him in his presence or in any land except Khurāsān . . . He must see that Abū 'Abdallāh gets to Khurāsān as governor over it and all its provinces, serving independently, with all its provinces assigned to him . . . All those whom the Commander of the Faithful has attached and will attach to his service shall go with him, including his *mawlās*, commanders, Shākiriyya, companions secretaries, agents, slaves, and the various people who follow him, along with their wives children and property. Al-Muntaṣir shall not detain anyone from going to al-Mu'tazz nor cause anyone else to share in anything of his administrative offices. He shall not send [to oversee him] a confidant, secretary, or courier. He shall not chastise him for any reason.¹⁷

This section bears a marked resemblance to a part in Hārūn's document of succession, where it describes the duties of the first heir to the second. There, al-Amīn declares:

In the event of the Commander of the Faithful's death, and the passing of the Caliphate to Muḥammad his son, Muḥammad must carry out all that Hārūn . . . has provided for in the governing of Khurāsān and its marches by 'Abdallāh his son . . . [and that he give 'Abdallāh son of the Commander of the Faithful] free access to Khurāsān and Rayy and the districts (*kuwar*) named by the Commander of the Faithful . . . It is not for Muḥammad . . . to turn away any officer or soldier or any other man assigned to 'Abdallāh . . . from him . . . nor to summon him therefrom to himself, nor to separate anyone of his followers and officers from him or any of his officials and functionaries . . . nor to occasion to anyone of those assigned to 'Abdallāh by his father from the people of his family, his followers, his judges, his officials and secretaries, his

¹⁶ Qur'ān 2:181 (trans. in Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 101).

¹⁷ Ṭabari, III, 1399–1400; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 101–2.

officers, retainers, *mawlās* and army, anything that might cause harm to them or constraint, whether to their persons, their families, or their dependents.¹⁸

The restrictions placed in this clause on al-Muntaṣir's potential change of attitude toward al-Mu'tazz are tailored by the chronicler in a particularly tight fashion to highlight the importance of maintaining loyalty to the succession covenant and, more importantly, to highlight the magnitude of the breach of this contract that occurred soon after al-Mutawakkil's death, when al-Muntaṣir modified the terms of this covenant.

The above quoted passage is also worth noting for the fact that it deals with the autonomy of al-Mu'tazz in Khurāsān. The territorial connection between al-Mu'tazz and the east, as events seem to show, was not a point of particularly heated debate either during his lifetime or after al-Mutawakkil's death. The audience of al-Mutawakkil's covenant, however, was familiar with an earlier situation where the connection between the heir apparent and Khurāsān was the most important side to the political prospects of the caliphate in the east, namely the situation of al-Ma'mūn vis-à-vis al-Amīn. As the confrontation between the brothers after Hārūn's death started from a dispute over whether the caliph in Baghdad exercised sovereignty over Khurāsān, and led eventually to the greater dispute over succession, one could see how the memory of the Khurāsān side to a conflict between the heirs apparent was to elevate the case of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn into a model dispute that epitomizes the failure of caliph-successor relation to the greatest extent. With the literary, historical, and moral background of al-Ma'mūn in Khurāsān still vivid in public memory, narrators found it useful to recast the conflict between al-Muntaṣir and his brothers over succession in terms that coincided with the political-territorial conditions that formed topics of discussion between the reigns of Hārūn and al-Ma'mūn.

One may attempt to justify al-Mutawakkil's succession plan as an attempt to safeguard the authority of the 'Abbāsīd family from the growing influence of the Turkish commanders, but this does not explain the extensive clauses about the territorial division that was supposed to go into effect in al-Muntaṣir's reign. If under earlier caliphs Khurāsān manifested strong decentralist tendencies toward Baghdad, by the time of al-Mutawakkil the situation in the east had come to stability under the control of the Ṭāhirid family, with no further traces of millennial revolts. The lack of a historical context for al-Mutawakkil's succession plan, along with the general silence of the sources on the motives, details, and reactions to al-Mutawakkil's succession covenant, leads one to see in this document a literary set piece that was intended to signal that the caliph was gradually to turn away from a wholehearted support for his first successor. Official 'Abbāsīd policy that invested the first successor with the viceregency over the western provinces is once again mocked, by showing the governor of the east, al-Mu'tazz, eventually become the real focus of succession.

¹⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 656–57; Williams, *'Abbāsī Empire*, II, 233.

Extensive thematic material was pulled out of the text of Hārūn's succession document relating to al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn because the moral, political, and religious problematic between the two situations lent themselves to some basic analogies. A cursory look at both documents could well at first blame the caliphs al-Rashīd and al-Mutawakkil for sowing seeds of discord between the children by dividing the empire, raising questions about spheres of authority, and leaving many ambiguous areas open for diverse interpretations. However, while territorial division and the ambiguity of regional authority formed a key theme in describing the genesis of conflict among al-Rashīd's successors, the same theme did not play any role in shaping the conflict among al-Mutawakkil's heirs. How to safeguard the loyalty of the successors (not to mention the fathers) to the covenants of succession, however, was a main theme in both succession stories. The two situations are linked by the moral and religious challenge of violating a binding covenant. Why al-Muntaṣir is later driven to violate his commitments, and how such violations are justified within the 'Abbāsīd family, are questions that a reader would have then explored in relation to the texts of the documents and in light of a particular perception of the historical events that spanned al-Mutawakkil's reign. Viewed in light of this context, the narratives of the Sāmarran period can be seen crafted in dialogue with one another and the earlier 'Abbāsīd past, and do so in a way that still holds up the documents of succession as a frame of reference.

Whatever the arrangement that al-Mutawakkil drafted for his children, we can assume that the caliph by AH 235/AD 850 had clearly become in control of his political affairs. By now he had come a long way from the timid and inexperienced personality that had earlier been touted at court. Although the caliph's earlier suppression of Itākh and Ibn al-Zayyāt had already provided concrete evidence of a newly born political will, the assassinations were merely preparatory steps before the caliph could begin making his own positive mark on the 'Abbāsīd government. The lifting of the *miḥna* and the caliph's support for the Ḥadīth party were already two such policies that get extensive praise in the chronicles. This gesture, however, relates to the religious side of the caliph's identity, which has to be treated separately from the caliph's political morality and commitment to ideals of government.

Whereas al-Mutawakkil's religious achievements were crucial and would be instrumental in facilitating the redemption of the caliphal personality, he would soon show some fatal flaws that would initiate a moral, social, and political crisis in the 'Abbāsīd family. Old 'Abbāsīd political flaws could already be seen in the way al-Mutawakkil showed a bitter hostility toward the 'Alids. Although on the whole the sources do not entertain 'Alid claims to rule (at least on a surface level), we can sense their deep sympathy to the 'Alids when they become victims of state oppression. Al-Mutawakkil's adoption of the old 'Abbāsīd hostility to the 'Alids reenacts a type of rigid prejudice that the sources indirectly criticize in the behavior of the 'Abbāsīds. The bulk of

the material that occupies the remainder of the chroniclers' description of the caliph's behavior and provides the turning point in al-Mutawakkil's descent has to do with his new attitudes which jeopardized the prospects of succession.

Toward the end of his life, for no apparent reason, al-Mutawakkil began shifting his attention from the first successor, al-Muntaṣir, to the second, al-Mu'tazz. Demonstrating this change in attitude were the caliph's transfer of various honorific tasks, generally assigned to the first successor, to the second heir apparent. Since al-Mu'tazz was still a child, while al-Muntaṣir a grown man who could credibly discharge official responsibilities, al-Mutawakkil's new inclination to al-Mu'tazz was a clear personal affront to al-Muntaṣir as well as a move that threatened the credibility or potential effectiveness of the succession covenant. In these dangerous breaches of custom, al-Mutawakkil was helped by his new minister al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, who, like Ibn al-Zayyāt (as well as al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī' and 'Alī b. 'Isā b. Māhān) in an earlier time, encouraged the caliph to ignore the right of the elder son in favor of a younger. Whether the brothers were already beginning to attract different power blocs in the 'Abbāsid political elite cannot be easily shown without a substantial projection of later developments back onto the earlier political scene. What seems certain, however, is that all these moves irritated al-Muntaṣir, who, like al-Mutawakkil at a similar stage in his life, began to feel helpless before his father's abuse, humiliated in public, and unable to compete with the vizir/companion for the caliph's attention.

Why the caliph started to turn away from al-Muntaṣir is not clear. Whereas in the case of al-Rashīd and al-Amīn we have numerous stories about the growing defects of al-Amīn, and the caliph's fear that al-Amīn would not make a credible political leader, in the case of al-Mutawakkil and al-Muntaṣir, there are no such problems associated with al-Muntaṣir. Such a frame for a moralizing contrast between characters indeed shifts in this period from showing the opposing behavior of brothers (in the case of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn) to showing the contrast between father and son. Al-Mutawakkil's behavior gradually transforms into arrogance, frivolity, and unjustified prejudice, leaving the reader to empathize more with al-Muntaṣir as the vulnerable, unsuspecting victim, just as Hārūn and al-Mutawakkil occupied similar roles in the beginning of their political careers. The reader slowly turns against al-Mutawakkil, but also begins wondering how this new example of authoritarian indulgence can be stopped.¹⁹

¹⁹ The story of the caliph turning away from his eldest son in favor of the younger is reminiscent of a classical biblical theme that frequently illustrates how a mysterious force of destiny often subverts the conventional law of primogeniture, bringing a younger heir such as Jacob or Joseph to the spotlight: R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), 6.

The murder of al-Mutawakkil

The murder of al-Mutawakkil intrudes into the narrative of the caliph's reign in a puzzling and unexpected way. In the earlier cases of caliphal murder, such as 'Uthmān, al-Walīd II, and al-Amīn, the historical narrative builds up a dramatic plot on regional, factional, and personal levels that prepare the reader to confront the strong likelihood of caliphal downfall. Al-Mutawakkil's murder, however, seems to be a spontaneous event. In comparison with al-Amīn's murder scene, the accounts here are shorter and less conflicting, and the final execution takes place in a much quieter atmosphere. The fact that the conspiracy of murder was hatched within a brief period beforehand by a group of people all of whom were in Sāmarrā' contrasts with the cases of 'Uthmān and al-Amīn, where the context of regional rivalry and diverse forms of opposition to the caliph complicates questions on motives, responsibility, and signification.

Despite its awkward context, the scene of al-Mutawakkil's murder occupies a prominent spot in the sweep of events and, like other scenes of caliphal death, it dominates the annals of al-Mutawakkil's reign. Narrators clearly seem to be setting up a moral and political problematic here in the way the episode is woven as a watershed for the escalating crisis. The story can be divided into five sections that trace the course of evolution in the political problem from violent confrontation to an ambiguity of legitimacy shrouding the event.

In the first phase we encounter the faint outline of conditions that inspire initial attitudes of negative feeling. Toward the end of the month of Ramaḍān in the year AH 247/AD 861, we are told, al-Mutawakkil expressed his intention to lead the Friday prayers in person at the Sāmarrā' grand mosque. Whether because this was not a caliphal custom or because the event contradicted the seemingly carefree personality of a caliph given to vain displays of power, the caliph's announcement generated wide public enthusiasm to come out to see the caliph and address him in person. For once the caliph must have seemed ready to perform a pious action and combine it with the duties incumbent on him as a ruler. The throngs then readied themselves to present various personal grievances directly to the caliph (*raf' al-qīṣaṣ*). The significance of this event promising access to the caliph no doubt meant far more in an age in which the caliph had become separated from the community by layers of courtly ceremonial and various ranks of Turkish troops.

No sooner had the caliph decided on making this laudable public gesture than a malign influence began to be felt. Al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān and 'Ubaydallāh b. Khāqān dissuaded the caliph from going out in person and suggested instead that al-Mu'tazz, now sixteen, lead the prayer. However qualified al-Mu'tazz was to lead the prayer ritual, the event signaled the first public insult to the heir apparent, al-Muntaṣir, whose seniority both in age and rights to

succession should have put him in the position of serving as his father's deputy in public. But somehow the caliph's vizirs had their way, and felt emboldened enough to do something similar barely a week later. With the onset of the feast of *Fiṭr*, the caliph, we are told, feeling some physical weakness, announced his intention to have al-Muntaṣir lead the prayer in his stead, but once again Faṭḥ and 'Ubaydallāh intervened and dissuaded the caliph from this decision by suggesting that it would be advisable for him to make a personal public appearance this time. With nodding acceptance, but little evidence of conviction in the reasoning behind the decision, the caliph accepted this advice and agreed to lead the prayer in person.²⁰

For the second time al-Muntaṣir was directly deprived of his due chance to bolster his public reputation, and the turnaround was, as before, brought about by the negative input of the caliph's ministers. Al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān and 'Ubaydallāh b. Khāqān here reenact the manipulative role that al-Amīn's ministers, al-Sindī b. Shāhik and 'Īsā b. Nahīk, assumed during the last days of the siege of Baghdad when the caliph contemplated an escape from Baghdad to Damascus and found himself first encouraged then discouraged from doing that by the two ministers. In both cases the ministers play a symmetrical role that triggers the context of flawed policy, and ill-will, and shows the tragic passivity of the caliph. The direct effect of the ministers' advice in the present case on both caliph and heir apparent neatly develops the conditions for crisis on both sides. As the caliph is entangled in this unwarranted offensive move, the heir apparent receives the burden of this aggression, thus preparing the way for his reaction. The lack of resolve in al-Mutawakkil's personality is used as an impressionistic device that highlights the political disharmony in the palace and the potential for inferior members of the ruling hierarchy to intervene in the caliphal household and stir the murky waters.

To be sure, al-Mutawakkil's personality, while politically flawed here, picks up merit in a different way on the religious side. The caliph's loss of interest in political matters – and coincidental decline in his physical health – occurs just as he suddenly enters a phase of religious awakening where he is concerned with pious deeds and austere behavior. This is portrayed most vividly on the day of *Fiṭr* when the caliph set out to lead the congregational prayer. Ṭabarī and Mas'ūdī recount the event of that first Sunday in December with affectionate detail. They begin by stating how the caliph's advisors had initially cautioned that a caliph's absence would only serve to encourage mischievous rumors in public,²¹ and they then proceed to describe the caliph's procession to and back from the prayers. On the day the caliph set out to ride to the prayers, we are told, the people of Sāmarrā' were lined up on the sides of the road down which he was to pass for a distance of four miles, with dis-

²⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 1453.

²¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1454. Note the connection of these cautionary statements to the earlier story about al-Manṣūr being told about the potential threat from rumors fomented by the *'amma* upon the absence of its leader from public and ceremonial events: Ṭabarī, III, 422.

mounted horsemen the whole way. When the caliph completed the prayers and retraced his steps back to the palace, he took a moment to cast a long gaze at the assembled crowds. Then he reached to the ground, grasped a fistful of earth, and sprinkled it over his own head to the astonishment of everyone assembled. When the caliph's companions inquired why he did that, he said, "I saw this mighty throng and, realizing that they were under my power, I wished to humble myself before God."²²

For the entire duration of the day of the feast and the day after, al-Mutawakkil continued in his sober, pious, and reflective manner. No entertainers were invited to join him as he seemed to prefer solitude. The pious demeanor of the caliph on those days stands in glaring contrast to the way al-Mutawakkil is portrayed in earlier years, as a cruel, capricious, and extravagant leader. The restriction of the image of al-Mutawakkil's austere religiosity to these last days was meant to provide a redemptive note before the caliph's plunge into his final crisis.

On the third day of the feast, al-Mutawakkil became a different person. He reportedly awoke that day displaying a sudden degree of physical vigor and cheerful temperament. He declared to his companions that he felt "as if he gained his pulse" ("*ka'annī ajidu massa al-damm*"),²³ and he showed an appetite for meat. Feeling elated (*nashīṭan*, *fariḥan*, *masrūran*)²⁴ the caliph then prepared for a schedule of entertainment. In a second set of narratives, we here encounter this mystifying turn in the caliph's personality. All restrictions seem to be unraveled from that day. The caliph broke with the rules of courtly behavior by inviting entertainers and those inferior in social status (the *ghilmān* named are: 'Ath'ath, Zunām, and Bunān) to dine with him. Taken aback by such an invitation, the entertainers hesitated at first, but then the caliph encouraged them by saying, "Go on and eat, by my life."²⁵ When their food ran out, the caliph allowed some from his side of the table to be ladled to them.

The events of that day are rife with symbols of the imminent downfall of the caliph. The initial reference to "the movement of blood," together with the unrealistic cheer (replicating in a converse manner the magnitude of tragedy soon to fall) and the image of the caliph's food being handed to inferior subordinates, provide ominous signals to the reader of the coming reduction of al-Mutawakkil. Ṭabarī, in fact, inserts an independent report attributed to a

²² Ṭabarī, III, 1455; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 173. There is a resemblance in al-Mutawakkil's behavior here to earlier stories about 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-Nihāya*, IV, 139).

²³ Ṭabarī, III, 1455. Mas'ūdī phrases this statement as: "*ka'annī ajidu ḥarakata al-damm*."

²⁴ Among these adjectives, the word *fariḥan* is intended to evoke the Qur'ānic verse, "*inna allāha la yuḥibbu l-fariḥīn*." The joyous banquet that soon follows is meant in a key way to be religiously ominous.

²⁵ This expression is a variation on a similar act of hospitality by al-Mu'taṣim toward Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād (see Ṭabarī, III, 1325).

certain Ibn al-Ḥafṣī that is totally devoted to describing an explicit omen. When Qabīḥa, the mother of al-Mu‘tazz, reportedly presented the caliph with a new green silk gown, the caliph at first glanced at it admiringly, but then suddenly ordered that the robe be torn into two pieces for, as he put it, “My heart tells me that I shall not wear it, and . . . I don’t wish [that] anyone wear it after me.”²⁶ To this, the caliph’s companions responded by saying, “Our lord, this is a happy day . . . God forbid that you should say this.”²⁷ The torn robe once again here evokes the similar scene with al-Amin’s garments during his last day.

Despite al-Mutawakkil’s unlaudable change of attitude in the above account, up to now the plot still gives no indication of a possible murder and the reader remains unprepared. Al-Mutawakkil’s rapid transition – from sobriety and piety to extravagant pleasure and forgetfulness of proper political manners – only creates the ambience for a new environment where further transgressions on both socio-political and moral levels could fully blossom, but the situation is not tendentious as in the case of al-Walid II’s murder, for example. To an extent, al-Mutawakkil remains an unwitting actor in a wider plot that is about to entangle him, his family, and his subordinates in a painful drama. In the next section of the murder narratives, specific problems begin to arise when the caliph initiates a series of unprovoked and hostile moves toward al-Muntaṣir. Presumably al-Muntaṣir would have been in the assembly of the caliph when the previous events were shaping up, but the narratives clearly guide our attention to a new scene that focuses solely on the character of confrontation.

As the banquet of al-Mutawakkil turned into a wine party, the caliph indulged heavily in drinking and a new, corrupt mood began to prevail. For no apparent reason, the caliph now began trifling with al-Muntaṣir in a demeaning and abusive manner. Suspecting that his eldest successor eagerly awaited the father’s death, al-Mutawakkil ridiculed al-Muntaṣir by telling him he would indeed have to wait long for the event of succession and that until it happened the public would keep on joking about the successor whom they already dubbed, he claimed, *al-Muntaṣir* (the awaiting), in a rhyming twist on “al-Muntaṣir.” In the throes of drunkenness, al-Mutawakkil laughed hysterically and ordered al-Muntaṣir to join in the drinking bout. Throughout this, al-Muntaṣir, both in his sober state as well as in his restraint in response to the abuse before the courtiers, is posited as an exemplar of morality, piety, and obedience to a figure who is both his father and suzerain. His silent response to these offenses is deliberately maintained in order to highlight the severity of the mental ordeal brewing within the son and heir. On the one hand, he is reaching out to the limits of his tolerance in order to maintain the ethics of hierarchy and loyalty to his kin both on a public and personal level. A drastic

²⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1456.

²⁷ Ibid.; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 175.

response from al-Muntaṣir could spell a different kind of moral violation and treachery. On the other hand, his personal dilemma is a moral challenge as well, for the reader is made to examine whether there are limits beyond which the status quo can be questioned from both a religious and secular point of view – a dimension of al-Ma'mūn's previous predicament with al-Amīn. Aside from the unbecoming behavior of the caliph, the unjustified public offenses of al-Mutawakkil serve to undermine the political future of the monarchical institution by reducing the dignity of the successor before low members of the courtly circle (soldiers, guards, boon companions). Although the sources do not state it openly, the reader is expected to make a wider use of al-Mutawakkil's phrase, regarding his feeling of "the movement of blood" ("ka'annī 'ajidu massa al-damm"). In a cultural milieu that would have established a correlation between the equilibrium of humors and the mental balance of the individual, al-Mutawakkil's phrase certainly would have been more meaningful as a key for understanding his behavior and coming death. It may equally have applied to al-Muntaṣir who, although he does not state it, radiates a degree of anger that would have been associated in the classical tradition with the image of an intense movement of the blood.²⁸

The problematic finally reaches a climax a little further in this scene when the caliph, reveling in his own humor, went on to order his companion, al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, to slap al-Muntaṣir. Al-Faṭḥ, himself a courtier with little reputation for restraint or deep moral convictions, is shown at first hesitant to obey the command, and when the caliph insisted using a particularly ominous form of oath,²⁹ Al-Faṭḥ obeyed but tried only to give the semblance that he was striking al-Muntaṣir. Nevertheless, the gesture was sufficiently humiliating for al-Muntaṣir, who could no longer maintain his silence, and finally addressed his father saying, "O Commander of the Faithful, if you had given orders that my head be struck off, it would have been more bearable than your present treatment of me,"³⁰ to which the caliph responded by telling those around, "Pour him a cup!" Al-Muntaṣir had finally divulged his own state of mind, which accomplished two purposes, namely expressing his feelings that humiliation is as painful as physical murder, and evoking the image of death soon to finish off the whole affair.

²⁸ The use of biological metaphors ("the movement of blood") to symbolize emotional states builds on ancient Greek medical and philosophical traditions about the correlation between thought and feeling, and the state of bodily humors: R. Padel, *In and Out of the Mind, Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton, 1992), 81. This influence on Arab historiography may have been transmitted through the scientific academies patronized by the 'Abbāsids which were instrumental in the translation of the Greek classics during the ninth century. The hysterical state of al-Mutawakkil was also meant to be read within the construct that established a symmetry between mental and moral disorder, a classical Stoic idea that would also have filtered through the Hellenized thinking of the academies that flourished in the mid-ninth century. On the techniques of Stoic philosophical drama and its implications, see N. T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983).

²⁹ The caliph swore that his kinship to the Prophet's family would be annulled if al-Faṭḥ did not strike al-Muntaṣir (Ṭabarī, III, 1457). ³⁰ Ṭabarī, III, 1457.

Al-Muntaṣir had had enough, and soon he would prepare to exit, while the caliph would order another dinner banquet set. The problem of irreconcilability between the two had reached its darkest hour, a fact that is alluded to in the descriptive drift of the setting when the narrator tells us that al-Mutawakkil prepared for his last supper “in the thick of the night” (“*wa kāna dhālika fī jawf al-layl*”).³¹ Al-Muntaṣir’s departure from the scene, while al-Mutawakkil set himself down to eating in a mindless state (“*ja‘ala ya’kuluḥā wa yalqam wa huwa sakrān*”), seals this scene, and prepares now for the alternative with its new problems.

The victimization of al-Muntaṣir by al-Mutawakkil echoes various earlier portraits of similar challenges. Al-Hādī’s suspicion and aggression toward Hārūn, al-Amīn’s aggression against al-Ma’mūn, and the most similar of all, al-Wāthiq’s offense of al-Mutawakkil toward the end of his reign all exhibit the same pattern. In each of these cases, the challenge is taking place on various levels – personal, political, moral, and religious. It seems regularly assumed that there is a set of ideal relationships that underlies proper government and personal attitudes constantly existing in the background, and that the confrontation on the historical level in each of these cases is challenging the ideal. In all these episodes, the challenge occurs in a paradoxical and irresolvable way. The dominant party, the caliph usually, instead of implementing the established ideal, violates it, and pushes the weak party into a process of soul searching and frustration, forcing him in the end to probe options (deposition, murder, treachery), which can settle the problem but in the process generate a new dilemma. There is a constant emphasis on the human predicament, the limits of the law, and the benefit of order as a conduit for virtuous activity. Yet there is also the dissociation of the “good” from any particular status quo and a question whether destruction and tragic conditions can credibly germinate a restoration of the ideal.

Al-Muntaṣir’s hasty exit from the caliph’s presence signals a transition to a new mood. We now expect him to build on his earlier expressions of frustration toward the caliph. While the chronicles on the whole directly associate al-Muntaṣir with the scene of conspiracy and murder that is to follow next, the contents of the individual narratives in the scene that follows try their best to erase traces of his role in guiding the plot. The narrator of the next scene, Ibn al-Ḥafṣī, states that when al-Muntaṣir exited from the assembly, he beckoned the servant Zurāfa to follow and once in a separate room told him, “I would like you to place the responsibility for your children with me. Utānish requested that I marry off his son to your daughter.” In another account

³¹ Ibid. The correspondence between the evil act of murder about to happen and the context of cosmic darkness occurs systematically in the setting of the murders of al-Walīd, al-Amīn, and al-Mutawakkil. In the narrative of al-Walīd’s reign, Ṭabarī quotes a narrator saying that the assassins set out on a moonless night (“*kharjñā ilā qitāl al-Walīd fī layālīn laysa fihā qamar*.”: Ṭabarī, II, 1801).

recounted by Bunān, another courtier who followed al-Muntaṣir when the latter departed, al-Muntaṣir also told Bunān what he had earlier promised Zurāfa. Very soon afterwards, as the three were presumably still milling in the area of the court, we are told that Bughā (al-Ṣaghīr), who is generally singled out as the architect of the assassination, reportedly came out to al-Muntaṣir, and addressed the latter as “Commander of the Faithful,” which implies the death of the caliph. Al-Muntaṣir is then shown greatly astonished at this, ordering that the court be temporarily sealed.

The statements, actors, and events in this scene may not seem related in a clearly connected way. Al-Muntaṣir’s declaration to Zurāfa regarding arranging a marriage for his daughter may hardly seem like the most pertinent topic after quitting the assembly of the caliph because of the latter’s behavior. However, if we consider that kin ties among the Turkish community of Sāmarrā’ were highly organized according to a caliphal plan that regulated patterns of marriage and divorce,³² then perhaps we are to detect in al-Muntaṣir’s first comment to Zurāfa an infringement on a caliphal prerogative, and hence a political challenge. The acceptance of Zurāfa and Bunān of al-Muntaṣir’s suggestion and the later appearance of Bughā show that, through his plan, al-Muntaṣir was able to realign ties among the commanders in a way that made them sympathetic to him and, in the process, encourage them to think of ways to dispose of the reigning caliph.

The next and final set of narratives depicts the actual event of the caliph’s murder. The main narrator here is a servant or entertainer by the name of ‘Ath’ath whose testimony identifies the assassins and the way they took over. The circle of conspirators includes Baghlūn, Bāghir, Waṣīf, and Bughā al-Ṣaghīr, with the latter leading the way. There are two distinctive characteristics in the account of murder. The first is the total absence of al-Muntaṣir or any references to him in this scene, and the second is the reduction of the offensive dimension of al-Mutawakkil’s personality. Whereas in the previous scenes, al-Mutawakkil is shown actively contributing a severely negative input that highlights his political failure, in the final scenes he becomes more of a passive personality. While it is true that the earlier imagery of his drunkenness is still there, he now appears as someone who is no longer in control of his fate. He is on a roll in his banquet frenzy, and continues to exacerbate his situation with ominous signs, but it is now only a matter of time before the story is wrapped up. He no longer has anything to say except to engage in physical activities that act as symbols for the final transition in his fate. The fact that al-Muntaṣir had quit the assembly may be taken as a reason for the reduction of Mutawakkil’s personal discourse, but one still senses the dependency of the

³² Ya‘qūbī indicates in his description of Sāmarrā’ that al-Mu‘taṣim, in his organization of the Turkish military system, settled the Turkish troops in specifically designated quarters and procured for them a designated group of women. Marriages were then arranged, and the caliph forbade the troops to divorce: Ya‘qūbī, *al-Buldān*, 259.

personalities on each other in the moral challenge at hand, and the clearly staged definitions of their roles and discourses. It is in the physical absence of the heir apparent and son from the caliph's presence, and the mental withdrawal of al-Mutawakkil from the scene of reality and rationality that now the court becomes the playground of low and disruptive members of the state elite. The reader is invited to see not only the result of the dispute between father and son but also the detrimental effect of the Turkish intervention in these disputes and the world of the religious and political elite. 'Ath'ath is quoted in two narratives which together provide a coherent portrayal of the scene of murder. In the first he describes how the head of the conspirators, Bughā al-Ṣaghīr, prepared the way for the event. 'Ath'ath states that

Al-Mutawakkil called for the repast after al-Muntaṣir had risen and left along with Zurāfa. Bughā the Younger, called al-Sharābī, was standing at the curtain [of the harem]. That day it was the turn of Bughā the Elder's patrol to guard the palace. His deputy in the palace was his son Mūsā, who was the son of al-Mutawakkil's maternal aunt. Bughā the Elder was then away at Samosata.

Bughā the Younger entered the audience hall and ordered the boon companions to leave for their chambers. Al-Faṭḥ said to him that it was not yet time for their departure and that the Commander of the Faithful had not yet risen. Bughā then replied, "The Commander of the Faithful ordered me not to let anyone remain in the audience hall after [he had imbibed] seven [*raṭīls*], and he has already drunk fourteen." Al-Faṭḥ still did not want the guests to rise. Bughā then said to him that the female relatives of the Commander of the Faithful were behind the curtain, and that he had become drunk, in which case they should get up and leave. They all went out except for al-Faṭḥ, 'Ath'ath, and four of the caliph's personal servants – Shaṭī, Faraj the Younger, Mu'nis, and Abū 'Isā Mārid al-Muḥriẓī. 'Ath'ath then continues the narrative:

The cook placed the repast before al-Mutawakkil whereupon he set about eating voraciously, inviting Mārid to eat with him. The caliph was drunk, and when he finished part of his food he recommended drinking.

'Ath'ath reported that Abū Aḥmad b. al-Mutawakkil, brother of al-Mu'ayyad on his mother's side, was with them in the audience hall. He rose to go to the privy, but Bughā al-Sharābī had locked all the doors except the one that led to the riverbank, through which the group that was designated to kill the caliph entered. Seeing them, Abū Aḥmad bellowed at them, "What is this, low-lives!" At that point their swords were already drawn.

At the head of the band that set about to assassinate the caliph were Baghlūn, the Turk; Bāghir; Mūsā b. Bughā; Hārūn b. Ṣuwāritegin; and Bughā al-Sharābī (al-Ṣaghīr). When al-Mutawakkil heard the cry of Abū Aḥmad, he raised his head and, seeing the group, he asked, "What is this, Bughā?" The latter replied, "These are the men of the patrol who have put up for the night at the door of my lord, the Commander of the Faithful." The group withdrew to the rear when they heard al-Mutawakkil speak to Bughā. Neither Wājīn and his companions nor the sons of Waṣīf were with him as yet.

'Ath'ath reported: I heard Bughā say to them, "Low-lives, you are as good as dead,

so at least die with honor," whereupon the group [of assassins] returned to the audience hall. Baghlūn rushed over to al-Mutawakkil and struck him with a blow upon his shoulder and his ear, cutting it off. Al-Mutawakkil cried out, "Hold it! May God cut off your hand!" Then the caliph tried to throw himself upon Baghlūn. The latter blocked him with his hand, which the caliph removed. Bāghir then came to Baghlūn's support.

Al-Faṭḥ called out, "Woe to all of you! [This is the] Commander of the Faithful." To this Bughā replied, "Why don't you shut up, you idiot!" Al-Faṭḥ then shielded al-Mutawakkil, but Hārūn slit him open with his sword, whereupon he cried out "Death!" Hārūn and Mūsā b. Bughā pounced upon al-Mutawakkil with their swords [and] killed him . . . 'Ath'ath was struck by a blow on his head. A young servant who was with al-Mutawakkil slipped under the curtain [of the harem] and thus was saved. The rest fled.³³

With the conclusion of al-Mutawakkil's murder, it is time to ask the question: did these events occur or are they merely a figment of the imagination of one writer who wove a drama around a basic historical fact (the caliph's murder) to address a set of controversial issues of the time? The final scene of al-Mutawakkil's murder certainly strikes one as realistic and possible. The situation is unlike that of the earlier sections leading up to this moment. In the preceding narratives, the chronicles are explicit about the incidence of omens, dreams, and premonitions that prepare the caliph, his companions, and the reader for the violent end. The courtly story-teller hiding the account about the murder of the tenth 'Abbāsīd caliph, the caliph's sprinkling of dust on his head after the feast prayer and his self-deprecating statements at the time, and his tearing into pieces a new regal garment because he felt his end was imminent and did not want a successor to take it over are all direct indications of a fictional structure in the account. The unity in the stylistic character and thematic function of these hagiographic incidents, in fact, led another narrator, al-Buḥturī, to weave them all into a single anecdote where they appear in succession.³⁴ The disorder of the hierarchical balance at court represented by the scene of courtly servants and soldiers stepping out of their station, mingling with, and improperly procuring food from the caliph's table are other symbolic signs which, although likely to be historically true, are also suggestive of an ominous political and moral shaping. Despite these mythic aspects toward the beginning of the account, one may still try to preserve the realistic sections of the narratives as we come down to the murder scene.

As before, however, the stylistic structure of the account leads one to doubt the operation of some symbolisms. One of the key stylistic culprits in the murder scene is the motif of wine drinking, which as we saw in the story of al-Ma'mūn and Tāhir was used by medieval narrators as an allegory on the politics of power. The interface between the red color of both wine and blood was routinely used as a symbolic device to demonstrate the relationship between

³³ Ṭabarī, III, 1459–60; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 178–80.

³⁴ This report is included only in Mas'ūdī's work: *Muriḥ*, V, 36–37.

politics and violence, anger and passion, egoism and indulgence. The intoxicating effect of wine provided a metaphor on the suspension of temperance and rationality. The specifically prominent role of Bughā al-Sharābī (the wine server) in crafting the conspiracy already hints at a symbolic meaning beneath the text. However, the core metaphor that the narrative lays as a detectable trope occurs when Bughā declares that al-Mutawakkil had ordered him to clear the room when he reached seven cups and that this evacuation must take place because al-Mutawakkil had reached fourteen cups. The number fourteen here was not a random choice but a reference to the number of years that al-Mutawakkil had reigned. That the caliph was not to exceed fourteen wine cups meant that his reign was about to be ended.

The presence of a concrete sign in the narrative can enhance one's skepticism of the narrative's realism. However, the more crucial level on which fiction has to be discerned is that of the plot itself: in the way certain personalities are chosen to assume certain roles, how these roles stand in dialogue with the histories of these personalities or other materials (events, relationships, and declarations) pertaining to personalities who lived in the earlier period of the 'Abbāsids, and in the way specific morals (political, religious, or cultural) emerge from the order of the actors and the statements they make.

Whether or not al-Mutawakkil deserved his violent end is basically the key dilemma around which the account revolves. The clash between al-Mutawakkil's particular behavior that night and his political and religious identity supplies the main material of this tragic situation. There is opposition to the event of murder in the way the Turks are rebuked, as will be shown below, but also in the way the caliph's character is revitalized for a brief moment before he is felled. When the narrator describes how the assassins were taken aback when they heard al-Mutawakkil ask Bughā what was happening, we recognize a caliph back in control of his senses and his state. His subordinates realize that instantly and are about to succumb. This, however, is not due to a revived sense of loyalty but as awe for his charisma as caliph. The scene is reminiscent of the faltering of the assassins of al-Amīn when they hesitate to attack at first until one encourages the others, as in al-Mutawakkil's case. Al-Mutawakkil, unlike al-Amīn, does not make reflective, pietistic, and pitiful declarations because he does not undergo the same experience of self-discovery and atoning confession that spells his redemption. Perhaps the orthodox voice in the narrative had put its emphasis on al-Mutawakkil's redemption in the accounts of his lifting the *miḥna*, but al-Mutawakkil's end remains very different from al-Amīn's murder scene. The revelatory statements al-Amīn makes at the end are anchored in a more complex plot, with various layers of meaning and diverse lines of historical connection. Al-Amīn's fall was the culmination of a grand moment cast in the sources somewhat like the last *fitna*, whereas al-Mutawakkil's was just a result of a palace coup, despite its evident dramatic grounding in certain political and moral challenges that unfolded within the family and the court.

Al-Mutawakkil's largely quiet role in the murder scene forms part of wider stylistic variation in the structure and resolution of yet another murder account. The absence of Bughā the Elder (on a Byzantine campaign), who was the main guard and former guardian of al-Mutawakkil, from the scene of murder is particularly pointed out in the narratives to show how the caliph was from very early on deprived of a person who would have averted the murder. Bughā the Elder's loyalty to al-Mutawakkil and his absence from the last scene is as ominous as it is symmetrical to the sympathy and loyalty of Harthama b. A'yan to al-Amīn. The reader would recall how al-Amīn's murder occurred only after the narrative distanced the caliph from that commander.

The analogy to al-Amīn's situation can also be extended to a comparison of the close tie between caliph and vizir (boon companion) and how this relationship provides a main axis for viewing the careers, attitudes, and ends of the similar personalities in the two accounts. Al-Faṭḥ, for example, is a character who is no less detrimental to al-Mutawakkil than the companions of al-Amīn were to him. In a pleasant stylistic twist, however, al-Faṭḥ goes on to meet an end unlike that of al-Amīn's flattering advisors. Whereas al-Amīn's flatterers chart the course of a ruinous series of decisions for the caliph but do not join him in downfall, the narrative of al-Mutawakkil reworks that plot in a way that shows the rather incompetent and unwise advisor, al-Faṭḥ, joining the caliph until the end. Al-Faṭḥ's bold defense of the caliph in words and deeds contrasts markedly not only with that of earlier court advisors, such as al-Sindī b. Shāhik and Bakr b. al-Mu'tamir, but with the behavior of 'Abdallāh b. Sallām as well. Whereas Ibn Sallām, near the hour of assassination, expressed sympathy for the caliph but withdrew and hid as soon as the scuffle began, al-Faṭḥ, who is not praised much for his gallantry, magnanimity, and piety in the sources, now bears the brunt of the defense and suffers as he tries to shield the caliph. On another level, al-Faṭḥ's character, both in his official capacity and seeming cavalier attitude to religion, is reminiscent of Ja'far al-Barmakī's relationship with al-Rashīd.³⁵ Viewed on this level, al-Mutawakkil's story provides a response to al-Rashīd in the sense that al-Mutawakkil now suffers a fate that al-Rashīd escaped. The fall of al-Mutawakkil and al-Faṭḥ together, therefore, is dramatized in the narratives in a way that shows what should have happened in two earlier narratives, the fall of al-Rashīd in relation to Ja'far, and the fall of 'Abdallāh b. Sallām in relation to al-Amīn. Symmetry is finally recognized with the redemptive fall of both characters, oddly enough this time survived by the son, al-Muntaṣir, who realizes the censored wish of al-Rashīd toward al-Hādī, and maybe al-Ma'mūn's toward al-Rashīd.

³⁵ The pairing of al-Mutawakkil's fortune with al-Faṭḥ's is pointed at in the fact that they were born in the same year (AH 200), and that they grew up together after al-Faṭḥ was adopted by the caliph al-Mu'taṣim (O. Pinto, "Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, Favorito di al-Mutawakkil," *RSO* 13 [1931–32], 138). Hence, just as a tie was earlier established between the 'Abbāsīd family and the Barmakids, a similar tie is here established albeit on a more limited level between the caliph and the Khāqānīd minister.

Al-Muntaṣir's predicament

In his description of the scene of al-Mutawakkil's downfall, Mas'ūdī quotes a narrator, al-Buḥturī who, after concurring with Ṭabarī and Ya'qūbī on the basic outline of the confrontation with the assassins, praises the heroic attempt of al-Faṭḥ to defend the caliph:

I heard the cries given by al-Mutawakkil when Bāghir struck him on the right side with the sword . . . then again on the left side. Al-Faṭḥ was still defending his master, when one of the murderers plunged his sword into his belly. The blade came out at the back. Al-Faṭḥ neither tried to yield nor to flee their blows. I have never seen a man with such a steadfast heart and so noble in spirit. He threw himself on the body of the Caliph, and they died together."³⁶

While having a significance as regards the caliph, al-Faṭḥ's final act of self-sacrifice is intended, as mentioned above, to contrast with his previous reputation. The schemes that al-Faṭḥ and 'Ubaydallāh b. Khāqān devised to deprive al-Muntaṣir of his privileges on the days before the assassination in order to promote al-Mu'tazz instead seem to have been an illustration of a more profound negative character that al-Faṭḥ demonstrated. Mas'ūdī states that toward the beginning of al-Mutawakkil's reign that "although he had a high courtly station and affinity with the caliph, al-Faṭḥ was not someone that people could turn to for favors."³⁷ He was neither generous, like the Barmakids, nor magnanimous, like Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād. The reader grows hostile to him and expects him to suffer an empty fall like that of Ibn al-Zayyāt. The gallant scene of al-Faṭḥ's defense at the end, however, shows a deliberate attempt to transform his fall into an experience with redemptive connotations.

In many ways the narrative of al-Mutawakkil's fall is a complex trope that was woven to address a community still unable to accept a caliphal assassination with facility. The episode builds up at once a damning chain of events, thereby eliciting a reaction, but then quickly complicates the reader's task of understanding by offering contradictory pietistic and moralizing considerations. The graphic nature of the final moments of al-Mutawakkil and the synonymous yet variant accounts of the crucial tragic hour were intended to raise the observer's skepticism on the righteousness of the event. The bold defense by al-Faṭḥ of the caliph was intended to evoke and personify the centrality of political loyalty as a moral and/or religious responsibility. Al-Faṭḥ's spontaneous reaction is portrayed as a natural reflex to the violation of the hierarchical order by soldiers who were disconnected from the intellectual and moral underpinnings of such tradition. The drama, therefore, as in previous regicides, ends with the question: was the murder justified? And the problem posed by this question becomes the key for understanding the successive phases of turmoil that beset Sāmarrā' and Baghdad for the next quarter of a century.

³⁶ *Murūj*, V, 37; Lunde and Stone, *Meadows*, 260.

³⁷ *Murūj*, V, 6.

Although al-Muntaṣir's grievances were valid, and his reaction perhaps appropriate according to one line of political reasoning, the narrative eventually undermines al-Muntaṣir's position because it aims to demonstrate the priority of another set of principles. In some sense the narrative tries to lessen the implication of al-Muntaṣir in the event in various ways. His timely departure before the beginning of the murder marks a point of narrative politeness as much as it is intended to complicate the situation of the caliph.³⁸ A little later when al-Muntaṣir is informed of the murder by Bughā, we are shown that he is surprised and mildly distressed. His astonishment, however, like al-Ma'mūn's before, is by now a familiar rhetorical and political feature in the representation of prominent schemers. And no sooner is the caliph buried than the chronicles quickly turn against al-Muntaṣir, making him the target of this moral burden in various ways. His brief reign, lasting six months, is taken as the first indication of divine disfavor for his rule, and an analogy is quickly established between him and the Sasanian king Shīrūy who was responsible for the plot to assassinate Khusraw Parviz, a monarch with a tainted reputation in Persian history. Hagiographic reports quote al-Muntaṣir feeling immensely guilty, weeping over what happened, and stating that he had seen his father in a dream, telling him, "Woe unto you, O Muḥammad. You killed me, wronged me, and usurped my caliphate. By God, you will only enjoy the caliphate after me for a few days; then you are bound for hell."³⁹ Another account furnished by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī confirms that the caliph was unjustly killed (*maẓlūm*), by quoting a scholar who states that he saw al-Mutawakkil in a dream in a situation awaiting divine judgment. When the scholar asks the caliph what he is doing, al-Mutawakkil responds, "I await the arrival of my son, Muḥammad, so that I charge him before the Almighty, with my murder."⁴⁰ Ṭabarī includes an account describing how al-Muntaṣir died, stating that the caliph was assassinated by a poisoned pear in a murder arranged by the Turks, who reportedly feared reprisals resulting from his guilt feelings.⁴¹

The accounts about al-Muntaṣir having feelings of guilt over the murder of his father, the assassins' fear of reprisal, and the gloomy broken personality of al-Muntaṣir upon his father's death conjure up traditional turns in a regicide plot that were cited earlier in the case of al-Amīn. Al-Muntaṣir's attitude after the caliph's death mirrors that of al-Ma'mūn. Despite the general resemblance between the two, al-Muntaṣir's problem with his father, the complexity of layers in his intellectual dilemma during the murder, and his modes of response show a refinement in the depiction of protagonists. Al-Muntaṣir's

³⁸ The separation of al-Muntaṣir from the coming scene of al-Mutawakkil's murder is analogous to al-Rashīd's refusal to listen to Ja'far al-Barmakī's plea before the execution. Al-Rashīd later disclosed that Ja'far knew that if they did come face to face before the event, the caliph would not have had the emotional strength to put him to death: Ṭabarī, III, 685. This attempt to erase all traces of memory by moving into a different physical setting was also applied here to al-Muntaṣir. ³⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 1497; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 220; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 561.

⁴⁰ Khaṭīb, VII, 171. ⁴¹ Ṭabarī, III, 1497.

dilemma blends together elements from the narrative of clashes between al-Hādī and al-Mahdī, al-Rashīd and al-Hādī, and al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn. All his steps are carefully laid out for him at specific moments to ensure consistent entrapment. He is the ultimate tragic character in the way he recognizes his human and moral dilemma, endures the pain engendered by his perseverance, and finally attempts to break out of his dilemma only to suffer further blows from destiny. The drama of his career weaves together various levels of social dialogue (father/son, caliph/successor, heir apparent/courtiers), which are analyzed through different lenses (the Sasanian, Islamic) with often incompatible ethical precepts. The methodical progression of al-Muntaṣir on a career of crisis and calculated downfall reveals how his character is a highly controlled one in the drama of the Sāmarran caliphate.

The adjustment of covenants

The portrait of al-Muntaṣir, his reputation, and political career are dominated in the sources by the episode of al-Mutawakkil's murder and the previous relation between father and son. The plethora of accounts describing the poisoning of al-Muntaṣir and the brevity of his reign are singularly tied to that caliph's violent rise to power. Chroniclers were intent on showing through this dialogue how some transgressions are resolved by a providential plan, and on the ground. The connection between the fates of both figures meanders its way between the objectives of political irony and religious morality.

In a different and less direct way, however, the sources also critique the actual direction of al-Muntaṣir's policy after al-Mutawakkil's death. Al-Mutawakkil had worked hard to establish an orderly path of succession among his sons, binding all three in the covenant of AH 235 to insure the stability of his family in the command of the state, but al-Muntaṣir will be shown unraveling these plans. As if to fortify the impression that al-Muntaṣir's aggressive reaction against al-Mutawakkil was part of his larger flawed personality, the chroniclers attempt to show how al-Muntaṣir immediately followed up his rise to power by targeting his brother heirs and the late caliph's plans for their succession. One cannot but be surprised how, for all its brevity, the reign of al-Muntaṣir is choked with an abundance of official documents outlining the new oath of allegiance taken for his caliphate and additional covenants documenting the divestiture of his brothers, al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad, from their rights to succession. Viewed in light of the political turmoil that would engulf Sāmarrā' in the later reigns of al-Musta'in, al-Mu'tazz, and al-Muhtadī, all of which together highlight the dilution of loyalty to caliphal covenants, and the breakdown in the caliphal institution, al-Muntaṣir's reign bears the significance of planting the seeds of that later civil war. The official documents that comprise all the information we have of al-Muntaṣir's reign are ordered in a specific way that highlights ironic dialogue among them. Once again we are shown how a ruling caliph broke with the will

of the previous caliph, how the most binding of religious oaths were cast to the wind, and how the new caliph still went on to make a similarly complex religio-political oath while naively expecting that from then on such oaths would still be binding.

The narrative of the emerging drama once again centers on personalities of brothers as protagonists, on showing how a reigning caliph attempted to disinherit his siblings in an ambitious way, how the disadvantaged heir apparent is put helpless in a corner of political weakness, and yet eventually finds himself thrust into the political spotlight by the sudden working of destiny. Al-Muntaṣir's desire to depose al-Mu'tazz again evokes the plight of al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn, al-Mutawakkil, and even al-Muntaṣir himself. When informed of the decision to depose him, the fifteen-year-old al-Mu'tazz was deeply distressed and tried to oppose the wishes of his brother but with the power of the Turkish military on al-Muntaṣir's side, he could find no recourse for opposition. Al-Mu'ayyad, also affected by the decision but portrayed as more stoic in coping with the problem, tried to lessen al-Mu'tazz's agony, and hoped to console him. After a brief search al-Mu'ayyad found al-Mu'tazz huddled in a chamber by himself weeping over the matter. Only with great difficulty was he able to convince al-Mu'tazz that challenging the decision might be fatal and that as the second heir he should place his trust in God's plan, for that alone decides whether the caliphate will still pass to him.⁴² When finally both brothers were brought before the caliph to express their submission to the deposition plan, al-Mu'ayyad took a tragically prominent role in the way he spoke up on behalf of his still angry and silent brother, and resolved the situation in a peaceful way. A few years later, al-Mu'tazz would indeed become a leading political figure himself who would challenge the rule of the caliph al-Musta'in, then go on to rule upon that caliph's murder, and complete his political cycle by turning against al-Mu'ayyad and deposing him from succession. The tragedy in al-Mu'ayyad's fall thus does not happen so much with the actual event of his deposition but rather lies in the irony of his earlier defense of al-Mu'tazz and the way that event led to his own downfall.

The *bay'a* that al-Muntaṣir obtained when he succeeded his father is impressive in the way it weaves together a political and religious vocabulary meant to insure a binding oath. It begins by declaring that the *bay'a* is both a religious and moral duty upon those who swear it to the caliph. It is needed in order to maintain unity and peace in the community ("*ijtimā' l-kalima wa lamm al-sha'th wa sukūn al-dahmā' wa amn l-awāqib*") and to establish righteous rule ("*'azz l-awliyā' wa qam' l-mulhidīn*"). Those who take the oath promise to be loyal to the new ruler, give him wise counsel, and avoid sedition ("*alaykum ṭā'atuhu wa munāṣṣahatuhu wa'l-wafā' bihaqqihi wa 'aqdihi, lā tashukkūn wa lā tudhinūn wa lā tamīlūn wa lā tartabūn*"). The covenant further insists that loyalty is both an outward manifestation and an inner conviction.

⁴² Ṭabarī, III, 1475.

One must oppose not only outward seditious invitations but also resist inner skepticism about the validity or durative nature of such an oath (*“sarā’irukum fī dhālīka mithla ‘alāniyyatikum . . . rādīn bi-mā yardāhu la-kum amūr al-mu’mīnīn”*).

The document states that there is no retraction of the oath because it is a religious covenant much as it is a political one. A Qur’ānic verse is woven in the text warning of the consequences of violation (*“fa-man nakatha fa-innamā yankithu ‘alā nafsīhi wa man awfā bi-mā ‘āhada ‘alayhi allāh fa-sayū’tīhi ajran ‘azīma”*).⁴³ The document goes on to elaborate on these themes of loyalty and the religious imperative of obedience, stating that the covenant is a condition set by the caliph upon his followers (*“ishtarāta ‘alaykum bi-hā [al-] wafā’ wa [al-] naṣr . . . ‘alaykum ‘ahd allāh. inna ‘ahda allāhi kāna mas’ūlan wa-dhimmatu allāhi wa dhimmatu rasūlihi wa ashaddu ma akhadha ‘alā anbiyā’ihi wa-rusulihi wa ‘alā aḥadin min ‘ibādihi min muta’kkidi wathā’iqīhi an tasma’u . . . wa lā tubaddilū wa an tuṭī’u wa lā ta’ṣū wa an tukhliṣū wa lā tartābū”*). The document then concludes by reiterating the duty of followers to obey divine covenants and to support righteous principles (*nusratu l-ḥaqq*), and it lays out a string of penalties for those who fall short in the sincerity to carry through with their oath. He who violates the *bay’ā*, the document says,

all that [he] owns, whether money or immovable property, freely grazing livestock, or agriculture or stock farming, will become charity for the poor for the sake of God. It is forbidden for him to restore deceitfully anything of this to his property. And whatever benefit he has for the rest of his life from property of little or great value shall be treated in this way, until his fate overtakes him . . . Every slave that he owns today up to thirty years of age, whether male or female is free, for the sake of God. And his wives . . . and whomever he marries after them up to thirty years of age are divorced definitely by a legally approved divorce, in which there is no exception or taking back. He is obligated to go to the sacred house of God for thirty pilgrimages.⁴⁴

The text of the oath of allegiance to al-Muntaṣir paraphrases, and sometimes borrows verbatim, ideas, oaths, and arguments that can be found in Hārūn al-Rashīd’s and al-Mutawakkil’s covenants of succession for their sons. It also resembles the divestiture oath that ‘Īsā b. Mūsā wrote for the caliph al-Mahdī and is identical to the oath of allegiance that al-Mu’tazz would receive some years later.⁴⁵ The resemblances among these texts do not point to regularly used formulae of oaths at the ‘Abbāsīd court, that is, to real historical records from a lost chancery archive (although elements from these texts are likely to have been used), but rather they point to a set frame of moral and religious principles and covenants that plays a role of reference in the unfolding drama of the caliphs. There is irony in the way violations to these texts occur in a pattern that is almost as frequent and as identical as the language originally postulated in the covenants.

⁴³ Ṭabarī, III, 1477 (Qur’ān, 48:10).

⁴⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 178; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 202.

⁴⁵ Ṭabarī, III, 1546–49.

Read on its own, the covenant of al-Muntaṣir evokes an image of the type of commitment that the ‘Abbāsids constantly hoped they could gain from their followers. It is an ideal that was never realized, however, because later caliphs attempted to override earlier covenants by extacting new ones that were advantageous to them. Once precedents were set, such as when al-Manṣūr divested his uncle from his succession rights, al-Hādī attempted to depose his brother, and al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn went to war, covenants lost their religious significance and binding substance, becoming no more than a ceremonial contract that narrators used as an object of irony. When al-Muntaṣir declares in his *bay‘a* that obedience to the caliphate is total and binding, one is left wondering what the conditions, restrictions, stipulations, and duties prescribed in the oaths given to previous caliphs mean. As much as al-Muntaṣir’s oath prepares us for that caliph’s new design for altering the succession, the problem that constantly arises is: how do covenants made to different people in different times square?

Once again, the reign of al-Muntaṣir is shown presenting such a problem when the caliph orders al-Mu‘tazz and al-Mu‘ayyad each to declare acceptance of his deposition from the succession. In some sense, the new covenant is conscious of a contradiction with a previous one and tries to iron out the contradiction through some form of justification for the divestiture of al-Mu‘tazz. In the declaration that al-Mu‘tazz makes announcing his “resignation,” he states:

The Commander of the Faithful al-Mutawakkil . . . assigned to me this matter and had the oath of allegiance rendered to me without my consent, while I was a minor (“*qalladanī hadhā l-amr wa bāya‘a lī wa anā ṣaghīr min ghayr irādatī wa maḥabbatī fa-lammā fahimtu amrī ‘alimtu annī lā aqūmu bi-mā qalladanī*”). When I understood my circumstances, I realized that I could not execute what he assigned to me and would not be suitable as caliph of the Muslims. Whosoever is bound by the oath of allegiance to me is free to rescind it. I free you from it and I release you from your oath. I have no binding covenant or compact with you.⁴⁶

Al-Mu‘tazz’s declaration differs from earlier literary examples of self-pronounced depositions (such as ‘Īsā b. Mūsā’s) in the way it clearly leads the reader to notice a logical problem at the very time the statement fits with al-Muntaṣir’s plans. One is struck not only by al-Mu‘tazz’s unexplained self-deprecating statement that he realized he is not suitable for the caliphate once he became an adult (“*‘alimtu annī lā aṣluḥu li-khilāfatī l-muslimīn*”), but also by his earlier assertion that al-Mutawakkil’s succession covenant should be held invalid because it was taken without al-Mu‘tazz’s consent (“*qalladanī hadhā l-amr min ghayr irādatī wa maḥabbatī*”). The notion that the nominated heir apparent must desire to be nominated as a prerequisite for the validity of an oath comes up unexpectedly in these narratives. Al-Mu‘tazz’s statement tries to strengthen this argument by pointing out that the succession covenant

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1489; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 213.

should be deemed invalid because it was rendered when the heir was but a child. However, this only highlights the transparency of al-Muntaṣir's apologetic grounds. Ṭabarī tells us that when al-Muntaṣir circulated the declaration of al-Mu'tazz in the provinces as an official statement on the divestiture, the caliph also circulated his own announcement of this plan. In that statement al-Muntaṣir begins by highlighting the powers of the caliphal office and the necessity that subjects provide unqualified obedience to the commands of the caliph. In a crucial introductory passage, he states:

God – to Whom belongs praise for His blessings and gratitude for His favor – has made His caliphs governors, who carry out what His messenger was sent with. They defend His religion, preach His truth (“*al-dāʾim ilā ḥaqqihī*”), and execute His statutes . . . He has imposed obedience toward them (“*iftarada tāʾatahum*”) and related it to obedience to Him and to His messenger, Muḥammad. He has imposed it as an obligation in His unambiguous revelation (“*awjabahā fī muḥkami tanzīlihi*”), because obedience brings about tranquility of the multitude, harmony of passions, the creation of order out of disorder (“*li-mā jamaʿ fihā min sukūn al-dahmāʾ wa ittisāq l-ahwāʾ wa lamm al-shaʿh wa amn al-subul*”), security of the roads, repelling of the enemy, protection of women, sealing frontiers, and setting affairs straight.

He says: “O you who have believed, obey God and obey the Messenger and those of you who have the command.”⁴⁷

It is an obligation of God's caliphs, those whom He has rewarded with His great beneficence, favored with the highest ranks of His glory and entrusted with a way to His mercy, good pleasure, and reward, to prefer obeying Him in every circumstance, to discharge what is His due, each one of them in order of proximity to God.⁴⁸

This prologue lays out the fundamental tenet of obedience to caliphs as a corollary of obedience to God. The message is an orthodox one and dates from a period when orthodoxy had overcome its trouble with the epithet “God's caliph” because the title's signification had come under the control of the *ʿulamaʾ* and was now used to defend the guardian of orthodox law (ḥadīth) rather than the ruling family's own claims to power. It is within this orthodox frame that the drama of al-Muntaṣir's conflict with his brothers is then articulated. The caliph invokes the need to obey him, but the reader's memory of oaths administered to al-Mutawakkil is very recent and immediately wrestles with the problematic of contradictory principles at hand. The contradiction, however, is so accessible, especially when al-Muntaṣir cites the Qurʾānic verse above regarding obedience, that one cannot but notice that a narrator deliberately left some doors half-open in order to let a critical audience make its way in an appreciative and contemplative manner. Further problems in the documents of divestiture arise as we proceed to read now the real intent from the texts. Al-Muntaṣir builds on al-Mu'tazz's declaration of divestiture, telling his governors and officials in the provinces:

You now witnessed concerning the delivery to the Commander of the Faithful of two documents, in their writing, that is by Abū ʿAbdallāh and Ibrāhīm, sons of the

⁴⁷ Qurʾān 4:59.

⁴⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 1489–90; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 213–14.

Commander of the Faithful al-Mutawakkil . . . They mention in these documents what God informed them of concerning the Commander of the Faithful's sympathy and his compassion, and his providing well for them ("*yadhkurān . . . 'atfa amīr al-mu'minīn 'alayhimā wa ra'fatihī bihimā*"). And they mention the investiture by the Commander of the Faithful al-Mutawakkil of Abū 'Abdallāh as heir apparent . . . and of Ibrāhīm as heir apparent after Abū 'Abdallāh, and that when this investiture was made Abū 'Abdallāh was an infant, not yet three years old, uncomprehending of his investiture and appointment. Ibrāhīm was young and had not yet reached puberty ("*wa inna dhālika l-'aqd kāna wa Abū 'Abdallāh lam yablugh thalātha sinīn wa lam yafham mā 'uqida lahu wa la waqafa 'alā mā qullidahu wa Ibrāhīm ṣaghīr lam yablugh l-ḥilm*"). They were not legally responsible and the statutes of Islam therefore did not apply to them.

They mention that when they reached puberty and understood their incapacity to carry out their investiture and the administrative functions assigned to them, it became necessary for them to exhort God and the community of Muslims to let them extricate themselves from this matter with which they were invested and relinquish the administrative functions to which they were appointed, releasing thereby all those under obligation of an oath of allegiance to them, for they were unable to carry out what they were nominated for and unsuited to be assigned to it.⁴⁹

Al-Muntaṣir's own statement tries to expand the reasons justifying the annulment of the earlier succession covenant by arguing that al-Mutawakkil nominated his two sons, al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad, for succession mainly out of pity for their future rather than, the text implies, out of genuine recognition for their merits as potential heirs. Such a statement no doubt elevates al-Muntaṣir above his brothers as a worthy political leader, but indirectly it is meant to provide a response to those earlier instances when al-Mutawakkil and his advisors did so much to damage al-Muntaṣir's sense of political qualification. The fictive nature of these official documents, however, becomes most clear when al-Muntaṣir goes on to assert that the covenants to al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad should be considered void because the two heirs were but infants "and had not yet reached puberty" at the time of al-Mutawakkil's plan, and therefore "not legally responsible." With this phrase, we reach the crux of al-Muntaṣir's argument for challenging the oaths administered in al-Mutawakkil's reign. We also detect in the phrase an echo for the formula used earlier by various chroniclers to attack al-Amīn's nomination of his infant son, al-Nāṭiq bi'l-Ḥaqq, as heir apparent, first following al-Ma'mūn, then in place of him. At the time, al-Amīn's action was viewed not only as a hostile infringement of al-Ma'mūn's rights, but also as an irrational and religiously invalid policy. Al-Muntaṣir's repetition of al-Mu'tazz's own statement referring to his youth when the covenant was taken, as well as al-Muntaṣir's expansion and embellishment of this flawed situation, show a defensive argument that tries to cover over the problem of violating the oath to al-Mutawakkil. The documents are not devoid of other logical

⁴⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 1491; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 214–15.

inconsistencies. After reading the extensive declarations that both al-Muntaṣir and al-Muʿtazz make to bury al-Mutawakkil's succession plan, one cannot but wonder why al-Muʿtazz, who asserts that an oath declared in his minority is invalid, still considers it legally necessary that he release the caliph's followers from their oath or why, when he became an adult, he realized his failing to fulfill the responsibilities of the office. Although these clearly biased statements in the documents seem overly favorable to al-Muntaṣir, their purpose may not be so much to provide a pro-Muntaṣir position as to place that caliph in the context of a dramatic plot that subtly points to lingering historical pressures on his conscience and his transparent ways of challenging al-Mutawakkil's legacy.

The detrimental role of the Turkish commanders

Whether the opposition to and downfall of al-Mutawakkil was an inevitable reaction to the latter's style of rule cannot be determined in historical terms. Much as in their portrayal of the political careers and personal lives of previous caliphs, the sources are heavily charged with a moralizing perspective that weaves together political, historical, and human dramas. In the story of al-Mutawakkil and his children, we witness once again the unfolding of a plot revolving around characters with carefully calculated flaws. The behavior of these characters is locked in by conflicting moral imperatives, psychological pressures, and full awareness of the adverse side effects associated with each set of decisions. The ʿAbbāsīd narratives make it abundantly clear that al-Mutawakkil's downfall and the chaos that befell the caliphate after his death were a direct result of ethical discrepancies and abuses in the lives of the ruler which gradually threatened to undermine the dynasty's political legitimacy and the public good. Hence, although critical of his violent conspiracy against the caliph, the narratives successfully insinuate that al-Muntaṣir could not, as a capable political successor and moral individual, overlook his father's transgressions. On one level, therefore, the story of al-Mutawakkil's fall is that of a moral developing within the ʿAbbāsīd house.

On another equally important level, however, the narratives show us that all these excesses, reactions, and violent results within the Sāmarran court could not have happened without the detrimental input of a crucial new group of actors: the Turkish troops. Reading across the narratives of Ṭabarī, Masʿūdī, and others, one cannot but notice how the Turks receive a singularly hostile portrayal in the sources. Since pre-Islamic times they were portrayed as enemies of the Sasanian state which represented stability, order, and the rule of law. While Persian monarchs are portrayed as responsible state builders who constructed roads, irrigations systems, and fortresses to defend the frontiers, and who looked after the welfare of their subjects, the Turks figure in the historical plot as a hostile power bent on threatening the peace and prosperity of the Persian realm. Far from being viewed as an equal adversary with an

established political and moral system like the Greek or Roman powers, the Turks are represented as jealous rivals, little interested in the enterprise of successful government or issues of moral conduct. In moments of Sasanian political weakness, they intrude on the Transoxanian frontier only to wreak havoc until the time when the Sasanian monarch reasserts effective sovereignty over the land. Al-Iṣfahānī sums up this image when he describes what the Turkish leader Afrāsiyāb did after invading Persia. In a string of bitter descriptions of Afrāsiyāb's invasion of the north eastern frontier, he says, "During the time of his dominance over the Iranian Kingdom, Afrāsiyāb spent a whole month destroying cities, devastating fortifications, silting up riverbeds, ruining the canals, and spoiling the well springs" (*"wa baqiya Afrāsiyāb fi sinī ghalabatihi 'alā mimlakat Irān shahran yahdum l-mudun wa yansif l-ḥuṣūn wa yadfun l-anhār wa yaṭumm l-qunā wa yu'awwir l-ʿuyūn"*).⁵⁰ The effects of a Turkish aggression are therefore categorized in qualitatively different terms from the problems that arise with the occasional malevolent Sasanian despot, who may act unjustly or neglect the affairs of state, but does not make it his vocation to destroy the kingdom's resources. The conflict between Sasanid Persia and the Turks is cast in literary terms as a long-running confrontation between civilization and barbarism, order and chaos, which continued from pre-Islam into the Islamic period.⁵¹

Similarly in the early Islamic period, the Turks are shown prone to damaging effects.⁵² They significantly enter as key players in the historiographical plot after the caliphate has absorbed Persian political institutions and inherited the moral and political character of world leadership that the Sasanian empire projected on Persian scholars and society. And once again, after Islam, the challenge presented to the caliphate by the Turks is shown as continuation of a confrontation now imbued with religious labels as a conflict between the forces of order and piety on the one hand and the forces of ruin and unbelief on the other. And although they convert to Islam and become the loyal personal guard of the caliphs al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim, the Turks continue to be represented by narrators as an unprincipled and power-hungry group, who constantly eye the caliphate with greed and ambition. Since political power still lay with the vizirs and the Ṭāhirid commanders, the Turks were kept at bay for a while, but one is led to see how they constantly looked for an opening that could lift them into the center stage of courtly politics. The tension that

⁵⁰ Al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'rikh Sinī Mulūk al-Ard*, 29.

⁵¹ A similar contradiction is evident in ancient Greek historiography, but cast in the juxtaposition of Greeks and Persians: P. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience* (Baltimore, 1994), 88, 181ff.

⁵² This negative characterization of the Turks certainly crosses boundaries in the medieval Islamic historical texts. According to one account, when Yazdigard contemplated escaping to the Turkish empire to reorganize an attack against the Arabs, he was cautioned by the people of Persia (*ahl Fāris*) that surrendering to the Arabs would be a sounder choice in view of their religion, whereas the Turks are accused of not having a religion (*"la dīna lahum"*) and are not known for extending sincere help (*wafā*) Ṭabarī, I, 2689.

arose between al-Mutawakkil and his son provides an illustration of an occasion that the commanders were quick to use to their advantage. Al-Muntaṣir's reaction to his father is shown as the product of a long and deep process of reflection on the options available and their consequences, but the Turks seize the opportunity spontaneously without considering questions of rank, loyalty, or the need to reconcile the ruling family.

Whereas in the reign of al-Rashīd the Barmakids showed meticulous concern for the question of organizing a durable pattern of succession, cautioned against the breaking of oaths, and were constantly thoughtful actors in their attention to the welfare of the ruling family and the community, the Turks are shown to have little interest in any of this. Members of the Abnā' in Khurāsān could berate al-Faḍl b. Sahl for encouraging a challenge to al-Amīn and tell him, "How dare you intervene between the Commander of the Faithful and his brother?" but the Turks fully rally around al-Muntaṣir in his moment of anger with no dissenting voices or compunction. In their attack on al-Mutawakkil, the Turks do not cite any of the moral grievances that are traditionally invoked in the face of caliphal policy by the Persian *kuttāb* (bureaucrats), such as the unfair 'Abbāsīd treatment of the 'Alids, lack of attention to governmental principles, the flimsy commitment to covenants, indulgence in wine parties, or the failure of caliphs to uphold orthodoxy (as in al-Ma'mūn's adoption of the *miḥna*).⁵³ In brief, they do not rebel in order to restore a moral, pietistic, or social ideal, but merely to realize immediate material and political gains. Nor is there among them a clearly identifiable hero who champions a moral cause.⁵⁴ Throughout the Sāmarran period we encounter a series of middle-level commanders who are as troublesome among themselves as they are against the caliph. They seem to serve no significant political or military purpose except to foster discord in the ruling family, and drain the state of its financial wealth.

Officials contemporary with the era of Turkish power are shown cognizant of the deficiencies of the Turkish soldiers. In this context, one notices a surprisingly high frequency of strongly negative epithets hurled at the Turks, as we saw above in the statements of Abū Aḥmad (al-Muwaffāq), al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, or even Bughā himself.⁵⁵ Later, al-Musta'in would exhibit a negative

⁵³ It is worth noting that throughout the *miḥna* period, the Turkish commanders are never quoted as having an opinion on this matter, either as sympathizing with one party or another, or as involved in the procedures of the *miḥna*. This contrasts markedly with the situation of the Ṭāhirids who are shown more involved and concerned about the outcome of that debate.

⁵⁴ Bughā al-Kabīr may be viewed as an exception to this, such as when he reportedly saved an 'Alid prisoner from execution. However, Bughā's meritorious image is curiously cast within a Persianized character. In those moments, often carrying a hagiographic shading, when he upholds a virtuous position, he is shown speaking in Persian: *Murūj*, V, 72–73; W. Patton, *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and the Miḥna* (Leiden, 1897), 92.

⁵⁵ Also note al-Mu'ayyad's similarly hostile statements toward a group of Turks who were threatening al-Mu'tazz: Ṭabarī, III, 1486; Kraemer, *HT*, XXXIV, 211. A similar epithet is used by Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm (al-Ṭāhirī): Abū al-Hasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. G. 'Awwad (Baghdad, 1966), 39–40.

attitude toward the Turks in categorical social terms, such as when he is made to tell a group of Turkish commanders, "You are people of corruption and ill-repute who belittle the bonds of privilege" ("*antum ahlu baghyin wa fasād wa istiqlāl li'l-ni'am*"),⁵⁶ while al-Muntaṣir, after acceding to the throne, is shown painfully remembering the fall of his father, and regretting that he allowed the Turks to meddle in the affairs of the 'Abbāsīd court. It was said that afterwards he always used to be heard saying, whenever the Turks were mentioned, "these are the killers of caliphs."⁵⁷ The same accusation against the Turks is confirmed under the events of the year AH 252 when the so-called *maghāriba*, during a brawl in Sāmarrā', finally vented their anger on the Turks, telling them, "[Don't you stop?] . . . Everyday, you kill a caliph, depose another, and murder his vizir."⁵⁸

Together the Turkish troops appear as an anonymous group of actors who move about the narrative primarily to fulfill a crucial role in the downward spiral toward tragedy and chaos. Although converts to Islam, they are portrayed as so fundamentally different from others that even their absence from the picture is not deemed worthy of attention. When al-Muntaṣir tried to sequester the rights of succession from his brother al-Mu'tazz and the latter resisted first then agreed after the threat of the Turks, al-Muntaṣir, although well served by the role of the Turks, later told his brother how much he had feared that the situation might have threatened al-Mu'tazz's life. It was mostly because of the pressure of the opinion of the Turks, al-Muntaṣir says, that he had decided to depose his two brothers. Had he not deposed them, al-Muntaṣir says, the Turks could have harmed them. "What would I have done if this had happened? By God, were I then to exterminate their whole lot, that would not make up for even the injury of one of you."⁵⁹ Al-Muntaṣir's view also seems to echo a statement deprecating the Turks (and the Daylamites) that appears in various narratives.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ṭabarī, III, 1544; Saliba, *HT*, XXXV, 35.

⁵⁷ Ṭabarī, III, 1497.

⁵⁸ Ṭabarī, III, 1680.

⁵⁹ Ṭabarī, III, 1488.

⁶⁰ During his encirclement in the vicinity of Kerbalā, a sympathizer of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī asks his attackers why they are treating al-Ḥusayn's family with such hostility and tells the Umayyad army that al-Ḥusayn's request to give up to Yazīd instead of Ibn Ziyād is a legitimate request, which even if the Turks or Daylamites had asked should be granted (Ṭabarī, II, 286). Nearly a century later, when al-Ḥusayn's namesake led an 'Alid rebellion in Mecca in the reign of al-Hādī and eventually was defeated, the same phrase resurfaced. When al-Hādī's soldiers finally defeated al-Ḥusayn and brought his head to the caliph, al-Hādī reportedly berated them saying, "What have you done, you fools, bringing me the head of my relative as if he was a Turk or a Daylamite. The least that I should do is deny you your rewards" (*Murūj*, IV, 186). The same phrase recurs with a similar implication in the reign of al-Rashīd. When Yahyā b. 'Abdallāh is summoned before the caliph, sensing the malevolent intentions of al-Rashīd towards him, Yahyā tells him, "O Commander of the Faithful, we are tied to you by the bond of kinship, and we are neither Turks nor Daylamites" (Ṭabarī, III, 616). A similar phrasing can also be found in the narrative of the war between Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr and al-Mukhtār. After Ibn al-Zubayr captured several of al-Mukhtār's followers, one of the latter pleaded that his life be spared, telling Muṣ'ab, "O Ibn al-Zubayr, we are a people who turn to the same *qibla* as you do, and we are of the same faith. We are neither Turks, nor Daylamites. If we have quarreled with people in our region, either we are right and they are wrong, or we are wrong and they are

Among the various communities that made up the *umma*, no group receives as hostile a treatment as the Turks do.⁶¹ In the course of the *shu'ūbī* rivalry between Arabs and Persians, broadsides between the two peoples were frequent, but they never seem to have degenerated to the hostile level used against the Turks – or at least this does not show in the high religious and historical literature of the third century AH. A visible Persian bias in the Islamic narratives insured a bad name for the Turks, and this kept adjusting the changing role of historical villains to stay with the Turks. Seeing nothing but a thoroughly destructive role for the Turks, historical narrators elevated the adverse political role of the Sāmarran Turks into a sign of the end of times. No less a prominent progenitor of the 'Abbāsids than 'Alī b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās is made to comment, “Surely the authority to rule shall come to rest with my offspring. By God it will surely remain with them until they are in turn ruled over by slaves of theirs, possessing small eyes, round visages, and faces like hammered shields.”⁶² The coming of the Turks was here cast as the death knell of the caliphate. It is within this millennial political framework of representing the Turks that we should also place the image of the Turks as tenacious warriors. The widely popular portrait of the Turks as distinctive warriors may have less to do with any unique military skill that they had than with the fact that narrators sought to exaggerate the military power of the Turks in order to maintain a consistent role for them as an instrument of divine punishment at the end of time.

footnote 60 (*cont.*)

right. We have fought among ourselves as the people of Syria fought among themselves, who fought each other then drew together; or as the people of Baṣra fought among themselves, and then made peace and drew together” (Ṭabarī, II, 740, partly drawing on the translation in Fishbein, *HT*, XXI, 107). And yet on another occasion during the same war between Ibn al-Zubayr and al-Mukhtār, when a follower of Ibn al-Zubayr was asked how he could go after the followers of Mukhtār with great vengeance, he said, “We thought it more permissible to spill their blood than to kill Turks or Daylamites” (Ṭabarī, II, 723; trans. Fishbein, *HT*, XXI, 90). Also, in a letter from 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās to Yazīd, Ibn 'Abbās severely criticizes the Umayyad ruler for initiating an attack on the company of al-Husayn “as if they were Turks or unbelievers” (Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 249).

⁶¹ Ibn Rusta further exacerbates the negative portrayal of the Turks when he tries to explain their situation in light of environmental and climatic reasons. He states that nations differ in their conditions in a measure that corresponds to their proximity or distance from the sun. Then looking at the Turks he says, “It is because they are located at a distance from the sun . . . and the consequent abundance of snow in their lands that their entire region has become damp. As a result of this, their bodies have become rugged . . . and their tempers have become cold . . . The people of this region are noted for their crudeness, lack of kin affection, and lightness of belief” (“*min akhlāq hādhihi al-nāhiya: al-jafā' wa qatī'at al-rahīm, wa qillat l-yaqīm*”; Aḥmad b. 'Umar b. Rusta, *al-A'lāq al-Nafīsa*, ed. M. J. de Goeje [Leiden, 1892], 102). Other negative characterizations of the Turks, on the level of genealogy, are attributed to al-Mu'taṣim by Ibn al-Imrānī, citing *malāḥim* texts. Al-Mu'taṣim is quoted as saying that they have no law or custom (“*lā sharī'ata lahum wa lā siyāsa*”); Ibn al-Imrānī, *al-Inbā'*, 106.

⁶² Al-Maqdisī, *al-Bad' wa'l-Tā'rikh*, VI, 58; *Akhbār al-Dawla*, 139. Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*, 43. The symbolic material employed in this tradition blends well with other hagiographic reports from the ninth century that evoke a similar image of the Turks. Compare the above image with the analogy assigned to al-Rashīd at the beginning (p. 178), making the comparison with the owl.

The picture of the Turkish role in Sāmarrā', indeed of the representation of their role in Islamic history, is closely tied to the Persian-centered nature of the medieval Islamic chronicles. The role of the Turks as a group can only be appreciated after we determine the role that Persian scholars such as Ṭabarī and his narrators (known and anonymous) accorded to the new Persia after its conversion to Islam. This is a subject that will require separate study across the various phases of early Islamic history, but is nevertheless one that has its salient features across the sources. The preponderant emphasis in the sources on the relation between Persia and the caliphate, the Arabs and Khurāsān, Islam and Sasanian political morality, and the Hashemites and the sympathy for the *da'wa* in the east form dense spheres of discussion that seem to regulate the broad intellectual structure of the Islamic historical narratives. In different arenas, various plots unfold in ways that aim at showing how this predestined collision between Islam and Sasanian Persia will in time usher in a political accommodation and moral synthesis that would once again restore to Persia its central historical role of leading the mission of religious salvation realized through stable political rule and moral government.

The process of Islamic salvation history is realized on the ground through the initial fall and eventual unsteady rise of Khurāsān. Viewed against the backdrop of the Rāshidūn and Umayyad periods, Persia's transformation after Islam is a process of dialogue and reversal for the political and social realities that took place in the early period. The political emergence of Khurāsān during the 'Abbāsīd revolution, as mentioned at the beginning of this study, was cast in the sources as a replay of the story of Islam's emergence in Arabia. The success of the 'Abbāsīd revolution had shown the distinct contribution of Khurāsān to the realization of the Hashemite cause, and this was reflected in the narratives, not just in the careful ordering of character roles but in the organization of communal roles as well. The group referred to in documents, speeches, and narratives as *Ahl Khurāsān*, for example, referred not only to an actual political group that once opposed the Umayyads, but was meant to stand in symbolic historical terms as the group that vindicated the memory of the Hashemite cause and affected the process of Islamic/prophetic rebirth. As a group, *Ahl Khurāsān* stand in dialogue with the so-called *Ahl al-'Irāq*, who had earlier dissembled in their loyalty to the Hashemite cause, betrayed its memory, and exacerbated the crisis.

From the rebellion of Yaḥyā b. Zayd in 743 to the 'Abbāsīd revolution, and eventually the rise of al-Ma'mūn, one sees a teleological trajectory of historical representation with repetitive aims and problematics, that was slowly realized with Iran's emergence. Al-Ma'mūn's tide of reconquest during the civil war with al-Amīn is a replay in reverse of the course of the early Islamic conquests, and it is no coincidence that a narrator made Ṭāhir exhort his troops as they prepared for battle before arriving at Baghdad, "O God, grant us a victory such as the one you granted the [early] Muslims at al-Madā'in

[Ctesiphon].”⁶³ Al-Ma’mūn’s victory is described in detail in the sources because it was perceived as an ideological and cultural response to the early Arab conquest of Iran. And eventually al-Ma’mūn himself will seem to be deferring to the wisdom of the Ṭāhirids when he accepts the advice of Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn to return the symbols of the state to their former official color, black, after having turned to the color green briefly during the nomination of ‘Alī al-Riḍā.⁶⁴ The Ṭāhirids, especially under the orthodox rule of ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, governor of Khurāsān, eventually became the chief protectors of Islamic orthodoxy even at the time when the caliphs were supporting the Mu’tazila. In various ways they came to inherit the now transformed mission of Islam, and proved to be the worthy heirs of the legacy of the caliphs. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, aside from receiving consistent praise for his political loyalty to the ‘Abbāsids and his unwillingness to be dragged into encouraging ‘Alid political expectations, later had his life tied in with that of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs in a mystical way. Once, when he was told of the year in which the orthodox scholar ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak died, Ibn Ṭāhir said that that was the year in which he was born, thus suggesting a linkage of affinity and inheritance.⁶⁵ Given the fact that Ibn al-Mubārak’s name is associated with *jihād* and the caliph al-Rashīd, for Ibn Ṭāhir to be associated with him signified an indirect link with Hārūn al-Rashīd. Other narrators strengthened this link between the caliphs and the Ṭāhirid governor further when they set the age of Ibn Ṭāhir at forty-eight years, which matched the ages of al-Rashīd, al-Ma’mūn, al-Mu’taṣim, and Ṭāhir.⁶⁶ Positioned as it is at the end of the line of a series of tumultuous reigns and checkered personalities, one expects the final stage to be one of climax or resolution, which indeed it was from the post-*miḥna* orthodox perspective. The existence of such links shows how the religious and political lessons cannot be separated from the stylistic and literary techniques in which the historical subject is woven. From al-Rashīd to Ibn Ṭāhir there is a coherent plot line that shows a clear point of beginning and closure.

As Sāmarrā’ descends into the abyss of political chaos and financial breakdown, a reader of the sources, particularly of Ṭabarī, cannot but note the striking contrast between the personalities who rule Sāmarrā’ and the Ṭāhirid situation in the east, the lack of a clear hierarchy in Sāmarrā’ and the systematic order of government in the east, and absence of any belief in political

⁶³ Ṭabarī, III, 859. ⁶⁴ Ṭabarī, III, 1037–38.

⁶⁵ On Ibn al-Mubārak, see Khaṭīb, X, 168.

⁶⁶ Khaṭīb, X, 191; Tha’ālibī, *Laṭā’if al-Ma’ārif*, 83. The caliph al-Mahdī also lived to the age of forty-eight. (Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II, 401; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Ma’ārif*, 380). Ibn Khallikān mentions that one of the reported ages of al-Faḍl b. Sahl was forty-eight: Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, IV, 44; Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh Qalqashandī, *Ma’āthir al-Ināfa fī Ma’ālim al-Khilāfa*, ed. A. Aḥmad Ferrāj, 3 vols. (Kuwait, 1964), I, 193. This age linkage is reminiscent of the famous linkage that exists between the age of the Prophet, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Alī, set at sixty-three, which is meant to show both political and religious communion among the various personalities.

principles in Sāmarrā' in contrast to the attention of the Ṭāhirids to the welfare of their subjects, deference to the *'ulamā'*, and balance of political functions. One cannot take this contrast as unintentional or accidental. Ṭabarī, living through these momentous political changes, no doubt felt the need to set up a model of historical success and resolution, and another one of failure. Occasionally, he might show al-Mu'taṣim lamenting to the Ṭāhirid governor, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm, the inadequacies of the Turkish commanders, in an anecdote meant to anticipate coming events under the later Sāmarran caliphs. The chronicler never, however, intrudes across the lines of anecdotal narration, and continues to rely on the reader's ability to decipher the overall structure of the narrative. Where he felt this historical process would lead to next remains, as a result, as much a mystery as how he perceived history had been structured up to that point in time.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters illustrate in different ways a central point of this study, namely that the historical accounts of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphs were originally intended to be read not for facts, but for their allusive power. Their descriptions of the lives of caliphs may seem realistic, but the narrators intended their anecdotes to form a frame for social, political, and religious commentary. We have examined how the historical records of the caliphs have an orderly literary structure. Although the information about the caliphs is scattered in diverse sources, such as Ṭabarī, Ya'qūbī, and Mas'ūdī, one can discern linkages in theme, style, and narrative motif across these texts, suggesting the existence of a unified atmosphere of narrative composition at some point before these chronicles were written down. Repetition of certain events and statements in the chronicles has generally been seen as an indicator of their fictiveness. The present study has argued, however, that it is not repetition per se that provides proof of a rhetorical embellishment of the text, but the existence of a dialogue among various layers of narratives that are centered on specific historical problems and upon actors who have a clearly defined set of characteristics and roles. From a basic event of historical interaction, such as the case of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, narrators extended the dialogue to encompass other aspects of the lives of the characters, developing in the process a whole new universe of interaction between these characters and among other historical personages, whose eras revolved around key religious, political, or moral crises, whether they were previous caliphs, Sasanian rulers, or prophets. Vizirs, commanders, and court officials were also incorporated as key actors in the created dialogue, which discussed a wide-ranging picture of historic change that addressed the fate of the community, the establishment of an effective government, and the resolution of a long-running dialogue between Khurāsān and Islamic messianism.

This dialogue in the text, it was argued, is carried out through a variety of literary instruments, with symbolism and pun forming two key features used to convey a well-planned authorial intention. Modern historians have often lamented the annalistic style of the early Islamic chronicles, which do not show the chronicler commenting on the events being recounted, and Ṭabarī

has always stood as the prime example of this silence. Yet in light of what we have examined about the internal structure of the commentary (criticisms of al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn, and al-Mutawakkil), it seems clear that there was no need for the chronicler to interject his opinion; indeed, doing so would have undermined the aesthetic basis of the literary construct. The message of the text lay in the very encoded structure of symbolism, allusion, innuendo, symmetry, and intertextuality that governed the make-up of the historical text. If the message does not seem readily accessible to the reader, this only serves to highlight the artistic quality of these rhetorical techniques and the elusiveness of the esoteric method of historical writing. For every era and every personality, there exists a layer of secret history meant to challenge the mind of the reader and/or listener. This method seems to have prevailed in the era that preceded Ṭabarī, when narratives were developing in an oral environment in response to momentous historical changes that were fundamentally altering the fortunes of the caliphal polity and pushing the Islamic community to raise some soul-searching questions about its role in the plot of history.

One may wonder why those narrators who developed this method of historical narration, responding to conditions of their time in this particular style, and recast earlier events in this way as well, chose to be so evasive. Two immediate explanations may quickly come to mind: first, that these narrators were attempting to evade the established political authority, trying to avoid offending the dynasty publicly; and, second, that they probably relished the game of tropology and did it for art's sake. Neither of these explanations, however, is satisfactory. The first reason, while on occasion a consideration, exaggerates the degree of attention the dynasty paid to narrators, and overlooks the mobility of ideas and scholars in that period. Furthermore, if political influence was a factor in certain instances, it can hardly explain why the same evasive technique was applied to nearly all corners of historical discussion. The second reason, also, is insufficient. As we have seen, the rhetorical strategies had definite religious, political, and moral goals. Across the reigns of the caliphs, one finds in the narratives about political and military officials, and in those about the overall relations between center and province, networks of thematic channels that were clearly intended.

It is more likely that this elusive technique developed because narrators saw themselves writing about topics that ultimately touched on issues more sensitive than whether they endorsed the political position of one caliph or another. Narrators were keenly aware that the narratives carried religious and philosophical implications, which they did not think should be accessible to every reader. Commentary on the political fortunes of the state was not merely a chronological exercise, but also one that opened up delicate questions concerning the relation between morality and politics, the religious significance of historical change, the nature of divine judgment, and the complexity of issues related to fate and destiny.

The story of the Barmakids and al-Rashīd, the war between the brothers,

and the rise and fall of al-Mutawakkil were all intriguing moments because of the ways they illustrated sudden reversals in fate and highlighted the interconnection between individual fortunes and the historical process. At times, this historical process is shown as following a moral plan, revealing a systematic correspondence between human action and the prevailing value system of early Islamic society. Within this picture, historical change is cast in relation to a responsive, divine plan manifested at the beginning and end of specific plots and through heuristic manifestations on earth. Human discourse, the dream world, and historical action blend in fields of circumstances shown to affirm or refute human expectations. Down this structured road, the reader is led to explore various story lines describing cycles of temptation, fall, and redemption. However, at other times narrators seem equally keen to demonstrate the inscrutability of the divine plan, the prominence of accidental change, and the immeasurable span governing certain plots.

All these issues would have been increasingly unpopular themes for religious discussion in the orthodox milieu of the ninth century, especially since they evoked questions and concerns about the *fitna* of civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn in ways that would easily have led to thorny discussions of the earlier *fitnas* that occupied the first century of Islam, with potentially more controversial implications, since they had involved the *ṣaḥāba*. As Islamic orthodoxy entered its crucial phase of canonization in the first half of the ninth century, it must have been clear to various narrators that raising these issues publicly was dangerous because of the doubts and rifts they could cast on the unity of the *jamā'a* and the stability of individual beliefs, and therefore that should not be made accessible to everyone. To open up the moral and philosophical implications of these narratives to everyone would have been viewed as an irresponsible act. Safeguarding the unity of the community as it was entering a new political age, one with priorities different from those prior to the civil war and the *miḥna*, in the end took precedence over raising open questions about the *fitnas*, their origins, and legacies.

This recognition of a logical structure behind the 'Abbāsīd historical text still leaves one major question: Who were the figures who composed these narratives? Who are those individuals who stand behind Ṭabarī's chronicle? There is no simple answer for this question. Ṭabarī's work can be used as the measure on this question because of the way it frequently includes the names of narrators, but it can also present us with a number of challenges on a source-critical level. One of these lies in the fact that Ṭabarī is highly selective in his inclusion of anecdotes and narratives that can be found in other sources. Frequently, there is no apparent logic behind his decision to include certain narratives and omit others. The texts seem to have been collected according to vague orthodox criteria. A more serious challenge with Ṭabarī's text as it relates to the 'Abbāsīd period in particular is that it often fails to give the chains of narrators, and when Ṭabarī does on occasion give the name of narrators, the chains of transmission are often interrupted and confused.

But perhaps the biggest challenge with the *isnāds* of this period lies in the problem of credibility of the names that Ṭabarī cites. Unlike the narratives of the Rāshidūn era, which show a regularity of narrator names and of topical focus, the narratives of the ʿAbbāsīd period are extremely diverse and anecdotal. One rarely encounters the systematic narrator chains that Ṭabarī so generously provides for the earlier period. Instead, when it comes to the ʿAbbāsīds, we find Ṭabarī quoting court officials, members of the ʿAbbāsīd family, and religious scholars affiliated with the court. This immediately leads one to doubt the credibility of these attributions, not only because the narrators lack the scholarly credibility (and/or the independent character) of those cited for the Rāshidūn period, and not only because it is unlikely that Ṭabarī had actual contact or contact through intermediaries with these individuals, but also because these narrators are often the very figures around whom the civil war narratives revolve. One can scarcely accept the attribution of accounts to al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, Yaḥyā b. Aktham, or courtly servants, like Masrūr or Bunān, because these actors, as well as their social and religious identities, are part of the socio-political commentary addressed through the narratives themselves. In light of this inconsistency in the chains of transmission, one finds it necessary to abandon these names and look instead toward the literary structure of the texts as the prime clue to their origin, formation, and guiding themes.

The quest for discerning the identity of authorial voices, however, while not attainable via the specific names of individuals whose biographies can be established, can still be traced collectively. One can discern the intellectual, religious, and cultural position of the narrator from his or his school's choice of literary motifs and narrative strategy. ʿAbbāsīd narratives show a thorough grounding, for example, in Qurʾānic vocabulary, but this vocabulary is frequently seen interacting with a moral vocabulary that derives from a Persian political tradition and from gnostic traditions. There are frequent references to the stories of biblical prophets in the biographies of the ʿAbbāsīd caliphs, but the profiles of the latter are also etched against the background of previous caliphal images, as well as against the lore about the Sasanian monarchs. And the repetitive features in the texts, the careful deployment of numbers in their narrative descriptions, and the open concern with astrological considerations point to further sources of influence, particularly the Pythagorean current that blended with the Islamic literary and cultural vocabulary.

The degree of complexity that went into the shaping of literary motifs from varied backgrounds, of religious ideas stemming from many roots, and of political considerations attuned to various factions, points to a highly cosmopolitan intellectual and cultural environment that enveloped the formative age of the early Arabic historical tradition. The interaction of Islam with various cultures in the Near East under the Umayyads had already encouraged the development of such a tendency. But it was the ʿAbbāsīd founding of Baghdad in that strategic urban location on the Tigris, and the rapid

transformation of the city into the preeminent metropolitan center in the medieval world, that took this process of religious and cultural symbiosis to a new level. Baghdad facilitated the early 'Abbāsīd drive toward political centralization and attracted people, ideas, and resources from different corners of the 'Abbāsīd empire and beyond. The patronage that the caliphs showed toward scholars, as in the case of al-Ma'mun and his founding of academies, such as Bayt al-Ḥikma which was devoted to retrieving and translating various scientific, philosophical, and literary works dating to classical antiquity, further institutionalized this process of intellectual and cultural integration. The impact of these developments is not a phenomenon that the sources discuss, but we have clear indications of it in the digressions that the 'Abbāsīd historical narratives often make to tell us an anecdote with a focus on a specialized point in the areas of philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine. And one can still glean from the cheerful and dreamlike quality in anecdotes about life in court or in the anonymous streets of Baghdad general signs of the prosperity of the age, and the imagined confidence in attaining the extraordinary. The searching quest for a bridge between the real and the fantastic, the feasible and the impossible, was eventually realized in the fictional tales even when Baghdad's political power declined.

The 'Abbāsīd caliphate did not come to an end with the great civil war between the brothers, nor with the military upheavals of Sāmarrā'. The earlier patterns of social, economic, and cultural interaction continued uninterrupted, and one may argue that they in fact flourished further with the rise of new provincial political centers that competed with Baghdad in attracting talent and skill. The institution of the caliphate itself was to survive for another four centuries. Caliphs never again were to rule as extensive a domain as did Hārūn al-Rashīd, nor would they wield a fraction of his political or military control, but they knew that they remained an important religious and cultural focal point across the Islamic world. Their names continued to be mentioned in Friday prayers in various corners of the Islamic world, and they remained a living symbol of the historical changes that the Muslim community remembered from its first centuries.

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